



CUTLER'S
CREEK

Cherished

Bestselling Author

VIVI HOLT

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Also by Vivi Holt
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CHERISHED

Cutter's Creek (Book 9)

VIVI HOLT

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About The Book

1871

Camilla Brown always wanted a family of her own. But it seemed destiny had other plans. She began to feel as though she'd always be in the background, helping others build their families, leaving her dreams to wilt and die.

That is, until the handsome Winston Frank comes courting at the church picnic. But then, Sheriff Clifford Brentwood sweeps her off her feet, literally! Both men make her pulse race. Both are determined to claim her love. Only one can win her heart.

When an unexpected danger threatens her very life, Camilla will have to make a choice. Who will she choose?

Chapter One

April 1862

Bilton, Wyoming Territory

Five hundred dollars sure was a packet of money.

Deputy Sheriff Clifford Brentwood whistled beneath his bushy mustache and pressed the wanted poster against the wall with his fingertips. He extracted a nail from the pocket of his vest, held it to the top of the poster, retrieved the hammer that hung from the back of his belt and knocked the nail into the paint-chipped wall outside the saloon. Then he tipped his hat back from his forehead to survey his work, his hands on his hips.

The man in the photograph in the center of the poster, “Wild” Clay Craddock, had a long black beard and empty eyes. Beneath his face, a \$500 reward was posted in thick black numbers, followed by a list of the outlaw’s crimes. The murderer, cattle rustler and horse thief had been a scourge on the Wyoming Territory landscape for three long years.

But Clifford knew it was only a matter of time until either the Pinkerton detectives or one of the sheriff’s men caught up with him. He’d hit a local ranch only two weeks earlier, taking two dozen cattle and a half-dozen horses, and Sheriff Frank Gillard was certain he was still in the area. He’d tasked the young deputy with hanging as many posters around town as possible, in the hope that someone would spot the man and tip off the authorities.

Clifford pushed his hat back down over his forehead and strode along the covered sidewalk toward the sheriff’s office. At twenty-three years of age, he wanted more than anything to make his mark in the world. He’d been working under the renowned Sheriff Gillard for only six months, and he was eager to learn as much as he could from the man who’d hung more outlaws than any other sheriff in the Northwest.

He pushed through a set of swinging doors and into the sparsely decorated sheriff’s office.

“Mornin’, Cliff,” Deputy Sheriff Nathaniel Winn called in his nasal twang.

“Good morning, Nat. How are you on this fine day?” He smiled and walked to the far wall. Wanted posters lined the space from floor to ceiling. He always liked to peruse them each morning, scanning the

faces so they'd be seared into his mind.

"I'm well. The boss should be in shortly – had to stop by the Post Office first. Did you get those posters hung like he asked?"

"I did." Clifford studied the wall, taking in the rows of Stetsons, bearded faces, steely eyes, and dirty neckerchiefs looped around thin necks. "Today's the day, Nat."

"For what, Cliff?" Nat studied a ledger on the desk in front of him, quill raised in one hand over the paper.

"We're gonna get Wild Clay Craddock."

Nat looked at Clifford with one eyebrow raised. "Is that so?"

"Yep." Clifford spun around and smiled at Nathaniel, his teeth flashing white beneath his blonde-flecked beard.

"Well, that would be somethin'. Bunch of rough-lookin' bounty hunters comin' to town after that reward money. Guess you're plannin' on beatin' the lot of 'em, huh?" Nat grinned and spun the quill between his fingers.

"You bet." Clifford slapped his thigh with one hand and pulled a silver revolver from the holster that hung low on his hips. He spun the chamber, examining it as it twirled. He'd cleaned it thoroughly last night, as he did every night, and the silver gleamed in the morning sunlight.

The front doors flipped inward and Sheriff Gillard strode into the office, his hat pulled low over his brow. "Mornin', Nat, Cliff. Anythin' I should know?"

"Yep." Nathaniel jumped to his feet and followed the sheriff into his office. "Bounty hunters have been arriving by the dozen over the past twenty-four hours, just as you predicted, sir," he said as the sheriff hung his hat and coat on the coat rack by the door. Clifford trailed behind them and inched into the room to stand just inside the door.

"Good. Maybe one of 'em will lead us to him. We'll let 'em do some of the work for us." Gillard chuckled and flipped through the stack of papers on his desk, his eyes scanning the contents.

"I was thinkin' we should go back out to the Larson ranch and see if they might have some idea of where the gang went to," said Clifford.

Gillard looked up with a frown and pushed his fingers through his spiky brown hair. "Is that so? We've already asked 'em all about it, and they didn't tell us nothin' helpful. What makes you think anythin' would be different if we went out there again?"

"Well, I'm thinkin' they've got to have some idea which direction the cattle went, since with the dry weather we've had there's bound to be tracks. The animals need water, and the Larsons would know where the closest watering holes are. I think they were just angry when we spoke to them. Now that they've had a chance to cool off, maybe they'd be a bit more helpful."

"Fine. You go out there and see what you can find out."

Clifford's eyes sparkled, "Thanks, Sheriff."

He turned to leave. "And Cliff ..."

"Yes, Sheriff?"

"Be careful. Clay Craddock is a man without a heart. He won't hesitate to shoot you, kid. So don't do anythin' stupid, okay?"

"Yes, Sheriff."

Clifford ducked behind a fence post, crouched low to the ground and ran. He'd made it to the Larson ranch and discovered the secret to the family's earlier reticence. He'd spotted an outlaw asleep at his post as lookout on the ground beside the wooden swinging gate that marked the ranch entrance.

Clifford had dismounted and crept his way to hide behind the large barn beside the house. He squatted there, peering around the corner at the house every now and then, figuring what the best plan of attack should be. It was several hours' ride back to town, and would take most of the day to get a posse together and back to the ranch again. The family was obviously in trouble and needed his help. So he'd decided to at least stake out for a while behind the barn and discover what he could about what was going on. Perhaps there was something he could do.

That was when he saw her through the door of the barn. Wild Clay Craddock and his gang were holding Bill Larson's daughter hostage there. Hidden behind several bales of hay, she was tied to a post, with a gun-wielding outlaw standing guard. The rest of the gang was holed up in the house, eating, drinking and playing a rowdy game of cards. He caught glimpses of them through the front door and kitchen window as they moved around.

He frowned. If only the sheriff had ridden out with him. What should he do? If he rode back to town, it was likely he'd be spotted before he got far, and if they didn't chase him down and kill him, they'd be gone before he got back with reinforcements. If he tried to take on the men alone, he'd most likely die in a shootout.

His heart hammered in his chest, and he drew in a deep, quiet breath.

Whispering a silent prayer, he crawled forward to peer through the barn doors again. The young woman stared at the ground with reddened eyes. Her blonde hair fell in thin strands over her face, her hands were pulled behind her thin back and tied to a sturdy post. She'd pulled and tugged until the knots had tightened over her pale wrists, leaving angry welts.

Clifford returned his revolver to his holster and drew his hunting knife instead. He'd have to be quick and quiet if he was going to get this done. He crept forward slowly until he was only a few feet away from the outlaw and closed his eyes for a brief moment. Then with a quick shove, he leaped silently from his hiding place and slipped the knife across the man's neck before he could let out a cry.

As the man fell to the ground, Clifford hurried to pull him into the haystacks and covered the drag marks with fresh hay. Then he ran to the girl's side and loosened the handkerchief tied tightly around her mouth.

She'd watched it all with wide eyes, and began to sob as he set her free. "Thank you," she whispered, her voice hoarse. "Thank you."

"Shhhh ...," he said, lifting a finger to his mouth. He pointed to the loft above them, and she nodded, picked up her skirts and quickly climbed the ladder to hide amongst the piles of hay stored in the top of the barn. He watched until he was certain she was safe, then turned toward the house with a look of determination on his young face.

Wild Clay Craddock had shaved his black beard, but he couldn't hide those vacant black eyes. They stared dully at the hand of cards he held. He chewed on a long piece of straw as he waited for the man opposite him to make his move.

His opponent pushed one card toward the center of the table and pulled another from the top of the deck to add to his hand. Craddock did likewise, his eyes never leaving the face of the man across the table. Both added a stack of coins to the growing pile beside the deck, then each fanned their hand of cards out in front of them without a word.

Craddock leaped to his feet and pulled a pistol from the holster strapped around his thick hips in one single, smooth movement. He held the pistol to the other man's head, and a smile crept across his thin lips. "You feelin' lucky, Hairy?"

"Sorry, boss. Just forget it, okay? I don't gotta win. It's yours – take it."

"You bet I will. You cheated, you dirty scoundrel."

"I didn't, boss, I promise." Hairy's eyes closed as he waited, his breathing rapid.

Clifford stepped through the doorway silently and crept toward the men. He'd already taken out the guard stationed outside the door with a knock to the head, and from what he could tell, only these two men remained. The rest of the Larson family was tied up together in the parlor.

He pressed his revolver to the back of Craddock's head and cocked the hammer with an unmistakable click. "Hands up, Craddock. You're under arrest."

Three days later ...

Clifford cleaned his revolver with a smile, his feet propped up on the desk in front of him. He glanced over his shoulder at the jail cell behind him and watched with satisfaction as Craddock and Hairy fought over a place on the single thin bench. He sighed, blew on the silver shaft of the revolver, then rubbed it with the underside of his checked shirt until it gleamed.

"Whatcha doin'?" asked the sheriff, striding into the room. "Everythin' under control here?"

"Just cleaning my weapon, Sheriff. Everything seems fine so far."

Gillard glanced around the room, his eyes restless, and grimaced. "I'm not feelin' good about this, son."

"What do you mean?"

"The gang's supposed to have seven men in it, right? That's what the Larsons said, and that's what the wanted poster says too. You found five. That leaves two unaccounted for, and it don't sit right with me." He paced back and forth, rubbing his mustache with one hand.

"Maybe they took off," suggested Clifford, reloading his revolver and slipping it back into his holster.

"Maybe. You just be careful, okay? I've got two more deputies outside, and I'm going to do another ride through town. We'll take these five on down to Cheyenne tomorrow, but until then ... eyes open, you hear me?"

"You got it, Sheriff."

The sheriff hurried from the office, leaving Clifford alone with the outlaws again. He tiptoed to the door, opened it and peered outside. It was getting light as the morning sun rose over the eastern plains, and the streets were drifting back to life along with its long, jagged rays. Two deputies outside paced slowly back and forth.

The rapid tap of heels on the covered sidewalk drew his attention, and he watched as the young woman from the Larson ranch hurried toward the office. Her hair was neatly pinned into a chignon, and a jaunty hat sat on top of her head. She looked completely transformed in a fashionable gown with a high-necked bodice, lace collar, and a parasol at her side.

"Good morning, Miss," Clifford said, dipping his head and touching

the brim of his hat as he spoke. "How are you feeling?"

"Deputy, it's so good to see you. I wanted to come and thank you in person for what you did for me and my family." Her blue eyes sparkled, and her cheeks were flushed a delicate pink.

He blushed and removed the hat from his head to press it nervously between his palms. "Just doing my job, Miss ..."

"Marlene – my name is Marlene Larson."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Marlene."

"And you ..."

"Clifford Brentwood, at your service." He took her hand and shook it gently, marveling at how small it was.

"It's a pleasure, Mr. Brentwood." She smiled and pulled her hand back to her side.

His pulse raced as he watched her. He'd never seen a woman as beautiful as her before. He'd been in town for six months, and he wondered why he'd never met her – he would definitely have remembered her if he had.

Six weeks later ...

"Hands behind your back," said Sheriff Gillard, pressing Craddock's wrists together and encircling them with the loops of the cuffs. Clifford hurried to open the door to the cell, and Gillard pushed Craddock through and out into the office.

But Clifford's mind was on Marlene. They'd been spending a lot of time together since he'd rescued her, and he fell harder for her each day that passed. He planned on speaking with the sheriff about a pay raise after they transported Craddock to Cheyenne – he could hardly be expected to raise a family on the wage he was currently getting. That's where he and Marlene were headed, at least to his way of thinking. She seemed to share his feelings, and the anticipation he felt as he planned his proposal made his heart jitter in his chest.

"We'll be back next week, Nathaniel," said Sheriff Gillard. "We should get to Cheyenne in five days, then back again. About eleven or twelve days, round trip. We'll see you then."

Clifford followed close behind the sheriff, pulling a rucksack onto his shoulder and donning his hat. Gillard's hat hung from the hat rack beside the swinging doors. As he reached for it, Craddock swung away from his grasp and ran through the doors.

"After him!" cried Gillard, breaking into a run.

Clifford threw the rucksack to the ground and drew his revolver

from its holster as he moved. Craddock was getting away, but he wouldn't get far with his hands bound behind his back.

As he passed through the doors that swung closed and slapped against his legs, Clifford saw the busy street stretched out before him. Craddock ran past the coach that waited by the side of the road, his fellow gang members seated inside under guard. Or were they? As Craddock passed them, one of the guards slumped to the ground, and the outlaws clambered out of the coach to follow their leader down the street. What was happening?

Clifford raced down the street behind Gillard, his heart pounding in his chest. The sounds of the street seemed dull in his ears compared to the thumping beat of his pulse.

Marlene!

She was walking toward him along the sidewalk, a basket over one arm and a smile on her pretty face. She saw him coming and raised her hand to wave, but her eyes traveled to his raised gun and a faint frown crinkled her forehead.

Clifford motioned to her to move, his mouth flying open to yell her name, but it was too late. Craddock reached her and grabbed her by the arm, pulling her to his side. She screamed, stumbling and grazing her knees, before he yanked her forcefully back to her feet with an arm beneath her chin, pressing hard against her pale neck. He pulled her after him across the road as he raised a Colt revolver and aimed it at Sheriff Gillard.

Clifford's heart leaped into his throat. "No!" he yelled, lunging for his boss.

But before he reached him, Gillard fired. The outlaw threw Marlene in front of himself as the crack of the sheriff's shot rang out over the screaming and bedlam of the terrorized street. The bullet hit Marlene in the center of her chest, and a ring of blood soaked the blue gingham of her dress. As she fell to the ground, Gillard fired again, hitting Craddock in the arm. The outlaw lurched sideways and crawled behind a building into a dusty lane, following behind the rest of the escaping gang.

Clifford ran across the street, his gun pointed at where Craddock had disappeared. When he reached Marlene, he fell to the ground and lifted her into his lap, his heart hammering, his throat tight. "Marlene! Marlene! Open your eyes. It's Cliff – please open your eyes." He stroked her hair as townsfolk crowded around them.

"Marlene!" Her father appeared on the edge of the gathering of townsfolk and pushed his way to them. He dropped to his knees in the dust and dirt and pulled Marlene from Clifford. He gathered her in his arms, tears streaking down his cheeks. "My darling ... oh no. What happened?"

Clifford stood slowly to his feet and backed away. He noticed a blood stain on the left leg of his pants and brushed at it absently. He felt his breathing slow, and he spun around and ran to his horse, tethered to a rail outside the sheriff's office. He leaped onto the gelding's chestnut back and reached for the reins of the sheriff's black stallion, pulling him free.

"Hiya!" He kicked the gelding in the ribs, and the horse broke into a gallop after the escaping outlaws, with the stallion following close behind. He would find Craddock and bring him to justice if he never did anything else in his life.

His eyes were dry, but his heart ached within his chest. Marlene was gone. The truth of that soaked into his soul and left him empty. Sweet, pretty, happy Marlene, the girl he'd rescued at the ranch, who had captured his heart in just a few short weeks ... she was gone. And it was all Craddock's fault.

Chapter Two

September 1871

Cutter's Creek, Montana Territory

Camilla Brown wiped the sleep from her eyes and shook her fuzzy head. Charlotte and Harry's toddler Johnny had been up five times again the previous night, and she'd barely gotten any sleep. Or at least it felt that way.

She'd heard him crying, and Charlotte getting up, shushing as she carried him from his cradle to the rocking chair. When Camilla had snuggled back down under the covers, willing sleep to take over, she'd heard him fussing as Charlotte burped him. Then Charlotte had paced the hall with him, singing a lullaby while he mewled and fussed. Finally he was back in bed and Camilla drifted off, only to be woken again two hours later. In the haze of sleeplessness, she felt like she was back home in England again, sharing a room with her younger brothers and sisters.

She frowned as another yawn squeezed her eyes shut. Charlotte must be exhausted. Little Johnny was doing the same thing night after night. She wondered when he would outgrow the phase, but wasn't sure if she'd make it that long without sleep.

She pressed her fingertips against her eyes. It was time for her to move out. She hadn't had a chance to break the news to Harry or Charlotte yet, but she'd decided to move back in with Sam and Estelle. Her Aunt and Uncle had a cozy little house in the middle of Cutter's Creek, and she'd lived there with them before Harry built this house. She'd asked them about it yesterday, and they'd agreed, saying it would be best for the newlyweds as well as for her to have separate spaces. Now was as good a time as any to broach the subject with Charlotte.

She tiptoed into the sitting room and found Charlotte in the rocking chair with a chubby Johnny on her chest, both of them fast asleep. She sighed and sat on the loveseat. They looked so peaceful, and Johnny so precious with his little fist pressed up against his soft rosebud lips. His lashes were black against his creamy cheeks, his pudgy legs wrapped sweetly around his mother's round belly. Charlotte was expecting another child in two months, and Camilla couldn't help smiling at the thought of another tiny member of their family.

Sleeplessness aside, babies really were adorable. It almost made her heart ache just to look at Johnny's little face, and she was excited to meet her coming niece or nephew. If only she were welcoming one of her own – she wondered if that would ever happen. It seemed she was destined to spend her life helping other women with their offspring rather than having any of her own. She frowned as the familiar pang of longing spread through her once again.

Charlotte stirred, her eyes blinking open as Johnny squirmed against her chest. She turned her head and saw Camilla watching her. "Cammie, how are you?" she yawned, and covered her mouth with one hand, her eyes closing briefly.

"I'm well. And you? You must be tired after last night."

"I am. So tired ... this pregnancy is really taking it out of me. If only little Johnny would sleep through the night, just once. I really could do with a full night's rest."

"I agree. I don't know how you'll do it once the baby comes. Johnny is only a year old – hopefully he'll learn to sleep better by then."

"I do plan on weaning him before the baby comes, so that should help. At least I hope so. I really do appreciate your help, by the way – I couldn't do it all without you. You've been an absolute life saver. I've never done housework before – all the cooking, cleaning, laundry and everything else that goes along with it. I don't say it often enough, but you've rescued me so many times. Thank you, my dear friend."

Camilla's face flushed under Charlotte's praise, and she swallowed. This was going to be harder than she'd realized – Charlotte would be crushed that she was leaving. "Well, I wanted to talk to you about that, actually ..."

Charlotte leaned forward to set Johnny, now fully awake, on the floor at her feet. He gurgled and sat up straight, chewing on one fist. "Yes?"

"I have really loved living here with you and Harry. I got to be here when Johnny was born, and that's a moment I'll never forget. But I think it's time for me to move out."

Charlotte's eyes widened and she drew a quick breath. "Move out?"

"Yes. I've spoken with Estelle and Sam, and they're happy for me to move back in with them. Now before you say anything, I just want you to know that I'll still be spending plenty of time here. I'll help out as much as I can, and I'll miss you all ... it's just that I think you need your space, and I need mine. But most of all, I need sleep. I'm sorry – I think I'll be of more use to you if I can get some decent shuteye. I don't know how you do it, Charlotte. You're amazing, the way you can look after Johnny with so little rest." She paused to swallow, watching Charlotte's face closely as she smiled faintly.

"Well, I suppose I can't expect you to stay here forever. You want a

life of your own, and I can't blame you for that."

Camilla sighed with relief. "Thank you, Charlotte. I was so worried you'd be angry with me."

"Angry? Why would I be angry? You've been such a blessing to me over these past months. And I'm so very grateful to you. But you're right – you do need your space. Only I do hope you'll still visit us – a lot!"

Camilla hurried to Charlotte's side and embraced her friend, kneeling at her feet. "Of course I will. You can't get rid of me so easily." She wiped away a stray tear that glistened on Charlotte's cheek. "And I'll be here when the baby comes."

"I'm glad," Charlotte sniffled. "I don't think I could do it without you."

"Yes, you could. But I'll be here nevertheless."

"Motherhood is a lot harder than I thought it would be," said Charlotte, wiping her cheeks dry.

"I know. I watched Mam over the years and helped her along the way, so I suppose I knew what it would be like for you. Though I have to say, I'm looking forward to getting a good night's rest at Sam and Estelle's. After years of getting up with children through the night, I appreciate sleep when I can get it."

Charlotte laughed and lifted Johnny to her side as she stood. "Well, I suppose I'd better get started on supper. I'll have to get used to making it on my own. I've relied on you so much, Cammie."

"Well, how about I help tonight anyway? I'll go tomorrow. Let's make potato soup – it always reminds me of our time in New York together."

Charlotte smiled and nodded. The two women walked toward the kitchen as the afternoon sunlight streamed through the windows across the kitchen table and glinted off the blackened surface of the stove.

The fire in the potbellied stove had dwindled, and Camilla hurried outside to the woodpile to gather more kindling. The steep peaks behind the house of the Bighorn Mountain Range threw jagged shadows across the narrow valley below. She carried the kindling back inside to the stove and stacked it on top of the embers. Leaning in close, she blew gently at the base of the pile and saw the flames flicker, then leap to light the wedges of timber.

Charlotte sat with Johnny at her feet, peeling potatoes and reciting a lilting rhyme to his great delight. He chewed on a stick of bread and scattered the crumbs in a wide arc around himself. Camilla smiled. She was going to miss the warmth and homeliness of this house and family. But she wanted to be closer to town, to be a part of things.

What she truly wished for, more than anything, was a husband and

family of her own. She longed to have a home and children that were entirely hers. That was her heart's desire, and she didn't think that was going to happen living out of town on the small mountainside ranch with Harry and Charlotte. It was time she started her own life. And tomorrow would mark the beginning of that adventure.

Chapter Three

“Cammie dear, are you ready?”

Estelle’s voice echoed from the living room as Camilla hastily pressed the final hairpin into her auburn bun. She turned from side to side, taking one last look at herself in the mirror, and grimaced at the freckles . They’d grown in number over the summer and were now splashed across her entire nose and cheeks. She grabbed her sun hat and pressed it onto her head before scurrying from the room. “I’m coming!”

Estelle and Sam stood waiting by the front door. Estelle turned to her with a smile as she fixed her straw hat. “Ah, there you are, my dear. Let’s go, shall we? Sam has already packed our picnic basket and blanket in the wagon.”

“It’s a beautiful day for it,” added Sam with a grin. He offered his arm to Estelle, who took it with a loving smile as she looked up into his face.

Camilla’s heart warmed at their open affection for each other. She hoped she’d one day be able to share that kind of relationship with someone. She followed them outside to where a bay gelding stood hitched to their peddling wagon. The bright colors of the sloped lettering stenciled on the wagon’s sides shone in the morning sunlight, and she stood still for a moment to breathe in the fresh fall air.

It was three years since she’d first arrived in Cutter’s Creek, Montana Territory, with her brother Harry, her now sister-in-law Charlotte, and friends Winston and Justin. In that time, Harry and Charlotte had built a house, gotten married and had a baby. Winston and Justin had bought land and were working hard to establish a ranch. She was the only one who hadn’t taken a step forward in her life.

In fact, she’d just gone backwards, returning to live with Sam and Estelle. She shook her head. Why was it that everyone else’s lives were progressing and hers wasn’t? She felt as though she was walking in place, when all she wanted was to take the next step – to have a family and home of her own.

She walked to the wagon and let Sam help her up onto the hard seat. There were certainly plenty of eligible men in the area, and a few of them had expressed interest in her, walking her home from church or bringing her flowers. But no one had really stood out to her. She wanted to find someone who made her heart beat faster, who brought

a flash of heat and sent a tingle over her skin at a touch. So far, she hadn't found anyone who did that.

Well, that wasn't entirely true – but the one man who made her feel that way didn't seem to share her feelings. Winston Frank was so handsome, and yet stoic at the same time. She could never tell what he might feel, and he certainly didn't seem anxious to tell her. He'd traveled to Montana Territory as part of their wagon train, and had included Harry in his prayer group at a time when Harry really needed it.

He was a good man. A godly man. He'd worked hard to set up a ranch with his brother, and she could see that he'd be a reliable provider for any family he might have. She just wished he'd court her, or even talk to her a little more often. He certainly made her pulse race. If only he'd give her the opportunity to get to know him better.

The wagon trundled past the little red chapel and out of town. The air was full of the aroma of wildflowers and fragrant grasses, and Camilla soaked in the warmth of the sunshine as it beamed down upon her head. Autumn in Montana Territory was beautiful: the contrasting colors of the landscape, the buzz and hum of wildlife around them, the trickle of a nearby stream. It was wild and lovely and striking, all at the same time.

They came to a small abandoned shack on their left, and pulled into the long driveway. At the end of the track, a series of wagons, buggies and sulkies were parked around the place, with horses tethered nearby grazing on the drying yellow grasses. Camilla could hear the chatter and laughter of the picnickers down by the river.

"You're off with the fairies today, my dear," laughed Estelle, clambering down from the wagon seat as she leaned on Sam's arm.

"Sorry, Aunt Estelle. I was just thinkin' how beautiful it is in the fall."

"Yes it is. I wonder if Winston will be here." Her eyes twinkled as she watched Camilla for a response.

Camilla's eyes widened. "I really couldn't say. Although it don't matter to me, of course."

"Of course," Estelle laughed. "Well, I, for one, hope to see him. Such a lovely young man."

Camilla's cheeks grew hot. She pulled the picnic rug from the back of the wagon and laid it over her arm. Was it so obvious to everyone how Winston affected her? She certainly hoped not. It would be most embarrassing if he knew how she felt about him and didn't feel the same way.

As they ambled down a winding trail toward the picnic, she squinted against the sunlight to see who was there. Charlotte, Harry and Johnny were seated on a blanket at the center of the group,

surrounded by Amos and Agatha Waverley, Heath Moore, and Abigail and Jasper Smith. She saw Rev. Howard Latsch and his wife Mary standing on the river bank, looking out over the water together. Near them were Jack and Willow Carlson with their toddler by their side. Willow was bending down to show the boy how to skip a pebble across the shining surface of the Yellowstone River, one hand on her swollen belly.

Camilla smiled – it certainly was a happy group. Suddenly she was very much looking forward to joining the gathering. She hadn't spotted Winston yet, and that was just fine with her. Now she could really relax and enjoy her time with friends.

Camilla nestled Johnny close to her chest and rocked him in her arms. She glanced around, noticed Harry and Charlotte walking side by side along the riverbank, deep in conversation, and smiled. She was glad to be able to give them some time to talk together without their little boy interrupting them.

With his stomach full of good food, he had readily succumbed to sleep when she gently rocked him, and now she was just enjoying holding him close. His little fist was clenched beneath his chin, as it so often was, and his eyelids fluttered as if he were dreaming. He was getting so big now – pretty soon he'd be walking. He had turned one year old in August, but she still thought of him as a baby.

"You look well, Camilla."

A deep voice from behind startled her, and she turned around to find herself facing Winston Frank. Her legs trembled. "Winston, what a pleasant surprise. I'm very well, thank you. And how about yourself?"

"Fine, thank you. Care to take a walk?" His cheeks were pink, and he held his Stetson awkwardly in one hand, the other extended toward her.

"Yes – I'll just give Johnny back to Charlotte." Charlotte and Harry had returned, and Camilla carefully passed the sleeping boy to his mother, kissed his cheek softly, then joined Winston. Charlotte's eyes shone, and she smiled meaningfully at Camilla, who felt the blood rush to her cheeks.

She fell into step beside him, one hand on his arm, the other looped behind her back and resting on her full skirts. Her breath quickened to walk so close to him, tall and strong, one hand loose at his sides and his sleeves rolled up to show tanned and muscular forearms. She glanced at her own hand resting on one of those forearms. It looked small and pale, and she resisted the urge to run her fingers over his

skin.

"I've been meaning to come by the Todds' house to see you," he said, placing his hat firmly on his head, then brushing at his beard absently.

"Oh?"

"Yes, I'm sorry I haven't seen you much of late. I've been spending every moment I can setting up the ranch. But I've been thinking of you."

Camilla glanced at him, and their eyes met for a moment. She felt the spark between them and a shiver went through her body. Her palms were damp, and she unlocked her hands to pat them against the fabric of her dress. "Well, that's nice to hear. I've been lookin' forward to this picnic." She smiled at him.

His brown eyes sparkled. "I was wondering ... would it be all right if I came calling on you sometime?" His face flushed, and he pushed a stray strand of hair from his eyes.

"I'd like that," she whispered, and cleared her throat. "Yes, thank you."

He smiled, and they stopped by the riverbank to stare out over the water. Ducks paddled by, their legs thrusting against the pull of the tide. One pushed its head beneath the surface for a few moments, leaving its tail protruding from the water. It fell back down, shaking droplets from its head and wagging its tail against the rippling surface.

Camilla heard the sound of a fiddle back at the picnic site and spun around with a clap of her hands. "Oh, I think the dancin's startin'. Let's go back, shall we?"

Winston drew a deep breath, his hands on his hips. "I suppose we should. Though I'm not much for dancing. Ma always said the Good Lord gave me two left feet, and I do believe she was right."

"Never mind," said Camilla, "it'll be fun all the same." They strode back to where the music wafted skyward in the field. Several young couples had formed into a pair of lines on the makeshift dance floor, and the rest of the group sat around watching happily, some clapping in time from their blankets as they finished eating.

Camilla paused, waiting for Winston to ask her to dance. She saw a droplet of sweat trickle down the side of his face. He removed his hat, threw it to the ground, then squinted at the sky for a moment. She frowned; was he going to ask her at all? Perhaps he was just taking his time?

Another voice interrupted her thoughts – not quite as deep as Winston's and a mite rough around the edges. It caught them both by surprise. "Excuse me, Miss Camilla ... would you care to dance?"

Her eyes flew wide and she spun around to find Sheriff Clifford Brentwood standing beside her with his ten-gallon hat in his hands.

His blue eyes were warm and confident.

“Yes, of course,” said Camilla. She took his outstretched hand and followed him onto the patch of grass where a vigorous jig was reaching its conclusion. Only then did she turn to look over her shoulder at Winston.

He watched them with a look of surprise mixed with aggravation. She hoped he wouldn’t be upset with her. It was his fault, really – he’d taken so long asking her to dance, when there was obviously a lack of ladies available for the single men to partner with. No, he couldn’t be upset about that. And she’d dance with him next if he asked her, which she hoped he would.

It wasn’t that she disliked the sheriff, but he’d barely said a word to her since she’d arrived in Cutter’s Creek. She couldn’t bear being around men who didn’t speak much. Their silence always elicited from her a stumbling, foot-in-mouth approach to conversation in a fruitless attempt to fill it. It was most annoying.

The music started again, and Clifford raised his arms for the waltz. She followed his lead and found herself enjoying the dance more than she’d thought she would. The sheriff was a good dancer: confident, agile, and his eyes never left hers. They were blue and crystal-clear like the sky. His sandy blond hair was cut short, and he’d pressed his hat back down on his head. It threw a dark shadow over his face, giving him a mysterious, angular look. He smiled, and watched her closely, seeming not to feel at all uncomfortable with the silence between them.

“How’ve you been, Sheriff?” asked Camilla, her cheeks warming under his gaze.

“I’m well, thank you, Cammie. And you? Are you enjoying being back with the Todds?”

“Yes, thank you. It feels a little like home.”

“Do you miss home?” He raised an eyebrow as he spoke.

She was surprised at the genuine concern in his voice. “I do. I don’t much miss the house – too small, cramped and cold. But I miss Mam and Da and the kids, and my friends in the village. Naught I can do about it, since it’s so far away. I suppose I’ll never go back.” Saying the words brought a tear to her eye, and she quickly released his hand to wipe it away.

“Homesickness never dulls, in my experience. But perhaps you’ll build enough happiness here to make the pain more bearable.”

She tilted her head to one side and listened intently. In all their time in Cutter’s Creek, she’d rarely heard the sheriff utter more than a few words at a time. She’d always assumed he was the unflappable type, strong and silent, without room in his life or patience for feelings. Maybe she was wrong about him. His words showed a great deal of

insight, and she found herself suddenly curious about his past. "You're not from this area?"

"No, my family are from Philadelphia. I grew up just outside the city on a horse farm, but decided to move west to become a sheriff when I was barely grown. I miss them still, though I didn't think I would've at the time. Pa and I didn't always get along, so I couldn't wait to leave. Now, of course, I look back and wonder what I was thinking. But I've made a life for myself, so I shouldn't complain. I'd like to go back sometime to visit – next year, perhaps."

"Oh, I'm sure they'd be so glad to see you. I think you should go if you can. I wish I could go back to see my family. Perhaps I'll get to one day ..."

"They've built a railway across the whole country, didn't you hear? You'll be able to cross it in no time at all. Surely that'll make it easier?"

"Yes, I do hope so."

The music ended, and they stopped dancing to stand facing each other. He smiled at her, and her heart quickened. What was happening? A few moments earlier she hadn't been able to think of anyone but Winston. Sheriff Brentwood had never shown any interest in her, and seemed happy to keep his distance from most people. But here he was, sharing details about his life with her in an open, warm way, as though it was the most natural thing in the world for him.

The fiddle player launched into the next song, and Clifford opened his mouth to say something. As quick as lightning, Winston was by her side, taking her petite hand into his large ones. "Will you give me the next dance, Cammie?" he asked, his eyes flashing at the sheriff.

Clifford dipped his hat and turned to walk away.

"Of course, Winston. That would be lovely." Camilla was surprised to find herself disappointed. She'd been enjoying their conversation and wanted to keep it going. Nonetheless she raised her arms, laying one hand on his shoulder. The other he grasped firmly in his hand.

He looked almost panicked as he swung her around for the two-step. He took gigantic strides and pulled her around the dance floor like a rag doll. They almost ran into Abigail and Jasper, and Camilla called out an apology as he jolted her away. Sweat streamed down his face, and his eyes were wide and bright.

"It's okay with me if you'd rather not dance," gasped Camilla.

Just then, one of Winston's heavy feet landed on top of hers. She fell to the ground with a cry, her ankle twisting sharply.

"Oh, dang it! I'm so sorry, Cammie." He squatted beside her, and took her hand between his, patting it.

"Never mind, I'm sure it'll be fine. It's just my ankle – I believe I may have twisted it. I'll see if I can stand ... ouch! No, I can't."

"I'll go get Sam and Estelle." Winston leaped to his feet, his brow wrinkled in concern.

"Yes, that would be grand. Thank you." Her ankle throbbed painfully, and she extended her legs out in front of her and pulled her skirts down over her knees. She felt ridiculous sitting there on the ground while the other couples thronged around asking if she was okay and whether they could help. The entire picnic had come to a standstill as folks stared and whispered. Her face flushed with embarrassment.

Sheriff Brentwood was beside her in a moment, and spoke quietly in her ear. "Put your arms around my neck." He lifted her hands to place them firmly over his shoulders, and she linked them together behind his strong neck. He lifted her as though she were one of the leaves falling from the oak trees along the riverbank and held her in his arms – one behind her back, one to support the bend of her legs.

"Oh! Thank you," she said as he carried her quickly from the lawn and up the walking track toward the wagons.

By now, Sam, Estelle and Winston had spotted them and were hightailing up the hill behind them. Clifford didn't say a word, just walked silently and smartly, his eyes on the trail ahead. His chest was hard, and she could feel the swell of his muscles firm against her. Her pulse raced and she felt light-headed. He was so masculine, so tough, so strong.

For that matter, he didn't feel the need to chatter away about nothing like so many young men. But then, he wasn't particularly young. She didn't know exactly how old he was, but from what she'd heard he'd never married. She wondered what his story was. He was handsome and seemed kind and good – any woman would be glad to have him as her husband.

They reached the Todds' wagon and he set her carefully on the wagon seat. "How's the ankle?" he asked, his hands on his hips, his blue eyes regarding her.

"It's throbbing, but I'm sure it'll be fine."

"Well, you should try to stay off it as much as possible."

"Thank you, Sheriff, I shall. And thanks for your help – I'm sure you didn't need to carry me, but I appreciate it all the same."

He removed his hat and scratched his head, squinting at her through narrowed eyes. "No problem, I'm happy to help. Say, I was wondering ... no, hoping ..."

"I don't think that was really necessary!" Winston arrived, puffing, at the wagon. "I was taking care of Miss Brown, Sheriff Brentwood. I was fetching her aunt and uncle, and would have carried her to the wagon myself."

"Oh – sorry, Winston. Didn't mean to step on any toes — no pun

intended of course. Good day.” He nodded at Camilla, tipped his hat to Sam and Estelle as they hurried past him toward her, and disappeared back down the hill toward the picnic.

Camilla watched him go and wondered what he’d been about to ask her.

“Are you all right, dear?” asked Estelle, gasping and red-faced from the exertion of the short climb.

“I’m fine, Estelle, really I am. Just a twisted ankle.”

“Well, wasn’t that kind of the sheriff to carry you all the way back to the wagon like that? Very chivalrous indeed.”

“Yes, sir,” added Sam with a smile. “And thank you, Winston, for your help as well. I guess we’d better get the young lady home so we can see what needs to be done with that ankle.”

Winston nodded, his face still thunderous. “Of course, I’m happy to help. I’ll see you soon, Cammie?”

“Yes, that sounds lovely. See you soon.”

Sam hitched the horse to the wagon, and they headed home as the noonday sun hovered above them in the wide blue Montana sky. A kestrel circled overhead. The clip-clop of hooves on the road mixed with the hum of insects and the call of a flock of ducks as they swooped in to settle on the wide, full river with a flutter of wings.

But Camilla’s mind was full of turbulent thoughts. Winston was handsome and strong, attractive and attentive. But Sheriff Brentwood was masculine and thoughtful beneath his hard surface. Just remembering the way he carried her back to the wagon sent a ripple of pleasure through her. Either one would no doubt make a good match, but which one did she prefer? It seemed that Winston intended to court her, but what about the sheriff?

Chapter Four

Winston Frank threw the bucket of slop into the trough and watched the shoats dive in snouts first, guzzling the food down as though it were their first meal in days. He smiled. They were growing quickly, gaining weight and size, and would be ready to move into the larger pen soon enough. Hogs were the livestock of the future according to his brother Justin, and they were both certain they'd make their fortunes on the backs of bacon and salt pork.

If only he was as certain about his future bride. He'd fixed his mind on marrying Camilla Brown when they'd driven the Bozeman Trail together three years earlier, but had to postpone courtship to get the ranch up and running. Now that the fifth litter of shoats had been weaned, he felt as though they were finally on their way. It was time to find himself a wife, and Camilla was at the top of his list.

He and Justin had left their family and friends behind in Cedar Falls, Virginia when Pa and Ma died of the measles. Uncle Trey tried to convince them to stay and take over Pa's feed store, but there was nothing left there for them. Everywhere they went, something reminded them of happier times when they were a family. Everyone they came across asked them how they were doing, with that hangdog expression of pity that made his throat grow tight and his head spin. They couldn't stay.

It was time for a new start, somewhere that didn't make his heart ache the way home did, a place where opportunity was rife. They'd heard about Montana Territory from Stu Hampton, whose cousin had traveled west years earlier. It was the place for young, strong, determined men, and Winston and Justin were all of those.

Their dreams of setting up a hog ranch were slowly becoming reality. Justin was determined to remain single as long as he could, traveling to Bozeman and other nearby towns on occasion to have fun with the local girls, but never settling down with any of them. Winston, however, wanted a family of his own. He knew that God didn't want him spending his time with a bevy of women only to leave them broken-hearted the way his brother did. He wanted one woman.

And that woman was Camilla.

She was so beautiful, she made his heart dance in his chest. Just being around her caused him to break out in a cold sweat. He never knew what she was thinking with that solemn face, always looking as though she was taking in everything going on around her but not

revealing her own feelings or thoughts. Her freckled nose was so cute it drove him crazy, and it was all he could do not to run his fingers through her auburn curls.

And just when he thought it was all coming together the way he'd hoped, that blasted sheriff had to step in and make him look like a fool. He could have – should have – carried her to the wagon. But instead he'd been more concerned with the idea that her aunt and uncle would help settle her.

Well, never mind, it wasn't too late. He just had to make sure that Camilla knew he was serious about her. He'd stop by the Todds' tomorrow after he'd fed the hogs to take her riding in the buggy. He just hoped the sheriff didn't beat him to it.

Chapter Five

The beat of hooves in the yard startled Charlotte from her semi-slumber in the rocking chair on the porch. Johnny, nestled on her chest, squirmed and squealed at the disruption. She shushed him and pushed her feet against the timber boards to set the chair rocking again as she raised a hand to shield her eyes from the setting afternoon sun, as the valley sunk into the shadows of the peaks.

She saw a young man on horseback approaching the house. He dismounted and retrieved something from a saddlebag, then jogged toward her with a faint smile. "I'm lookin' for Charlotte Beaufort?"

"That would be me."

"I have a telegram for ya, ma'am." He handed her an envelope.

"Thank you."

He nodded, hurried back to his horse, leaped into the saddle and headed back toward Cutter's Creek.

Charlotte frowned. Who would send her a telegram? It had to be her parents – she couldn't think of anyone else who would. She tore the envelope open and pulled a slip of paper from it:

CHARLOTTE:

YOUR MOTHER AND I WITH MARY ARE IN PROMONTORY CITY UTAH STOP. HEADING TO MONTANA TERRITORY TODAY STOP. WE WANTED TO SURPRISE YOU STOP. WILL SEE YOU IN A WEEK STOP.

FATHER

Charlotte's hand flew to her mouth as she gasped. Her parents were in the New World? When had they arrived? Why hadn't they told her they were coming to see her? How long would they be here? Where would they stay? And Mary was coming too? She felt her heart flutter, and her head grew light.

Johnny whimpered against her chest and his eyelids flickered, threatening to open. She drew a deep breath. She didn't want to wake him – he'd finally gotten to sleep after hours of fussing, and the last thing she wanted right now was for him to wake up.

Of course they'd want to stay here – it was only right. She glanced around the property, noting the half-finished fencing, the flower beds filled with weeds, the faded timber siding of the small structure. With a sigh, she lay against the back of the chair and resumed the rhythmic

rocking. Whatever state they found her home in, they'd just have to accept it. It's not like she could do much about it in one week with a fussy toddler to tend to and another on the way.

But one question flew around inside her head and wouldn't be quieted: why were they here? Were they simply coming to see her and meet their grandson, or was something else going on? She knew her parents too well to think they'd just show up unannounced for a friendly visit. Everything they did usually had some kind of ulterior motive. And it was just a matter of time before she found out what that motive was.

Chapter Six

Camilla held her hat with one hand and clung to the edge of the open-air buggy with the other as they jostled and bumped over the overgrown trail that fringed the Yellowstone River. The smell of fresh wet earth soaked the air, and everything sparkled after being washed clean with the torrential rain that had poured itself out over the valley for two full days. "Where are we going?" she asked, cringing as her rear landed hard on the seat due to a particularly deep pothole.

"Just a bit further. There's a lovely spot down here – I thought we'd take a walk, and I packed a picnic for us as well."

Winston steered the black mare deftly, with a smile on his face. He looked to be in his element, unlike when dancing. Camilla grimaced, remembering the way he'd pulled her around the dance floor before stepping on her foot. Her ankle was still sore, and she had to walk with the help of a stick Sam had whittled for her.

"That sounds lovely – although I can't walk far, of course."

He looked pained. "Of course. Can I just say again how sorry I am ...?"

"No need, Winston, really. It was an accident – these things happen. It'll mend in no time, I'm sure."

He nodded, but remained silent under the wide brim of his beige Stetson. Camilla felt the awkwardness grow between them and her mind searched frantically for a topic of conversation to break the impasse.

"I wonder, have you heard anything about Maria Holloway's kidnapping?"

Winston shook his head with a sad frown. "Unfortunately not. I don't think the Army is any closer to discovering her whereabouts. I'd hoped they'd find her by now, but I'm beginning to think we'll never see her again."

"I still have nightmares about it." Camilla blinked, and swallowed hard. She hadn't told anyone else about the dreams that plagued her. Even though she hadn't actually witnessed the moment the savages killed Fred and wrenched Maria from the wagon on the Bozeman Trail three years earlier, her mind had conjured up a scene that woke her often, bathed in sweat and with a scream on the verge of being loosed from her throat.

Winston gazed at her, sorrow in his eyes. "I'm sorry to hear that."

She nodded, pushing back a sob. "I just hope she's okay. I can't bear

to think of her in pain – she'd be so afraid, all alone out there. What must she think of us? We still haven't rescued her, and it's been so long."

Winston's jaw clenched, and he turned back to watch the mare trotting ahead of them without a word. He put his arm gently around her shoulders to squeeze her once, then dropped it again to his side.

She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and pressed it to her eyes, now wet with unshed tears. As the buggy jounced and jostled them against one another, she laid her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes, letting the peace and quiet of their surroundings wash over her.

Before long, they came to a small clearing in the midst of a clump of trees. He pulled the mare to a halt in the shade of a hemlock and climbed down to the grassy knoll beneath the buggy. He reached up his hand to help Camilla down before unhitching the mare and picketing her nearby to graze. "Well, here we are."

"Shall we walk, then?" asked Camilla.

"Yes. It's a beautiful day, isn't it?"

"It certainly is. After all the rain we've had since the dance, it's nice to see the sun again."

They strolled arm in arm through the clearing, taking in the beauty around them. They entered a tunnel with tall trees framing them on either side, the ground covered in pine needles that crunched with each step. The hollow was shadowed by the regal forest surrounding it, and the air was cool, hidden from the warming rays of the sun.

Winston walked with his arm supporting Camilla, who also leaned on her walking stick for support and shuffled along at a steady pace. "Do you ever think you could live on a hog farm?" he asked, his cheeks coloring as he spoke.

Camilla's heart fluttered in her chest. "I believe I could. Perhaps if I found the right man to marry."

He stopped and turned to face her, raising his hands to her shoulders. "Camilla, I ..."

"I think we should probably go back now, Winston," said Camilla, a tremor in her voice. "My ankle is getting quite painful. Perhaps I should sit in the wagon to rest it."

He ducked his head and dropped his hands to his sides. "Yes, of course."

Camilla sighed quietly as they turned back toward the buggy. Winston had been about to propose, or at the very least to kiss her beneath the canopy of branches. It had been very romantic, and part of her wished she'd let him. But instead of excitement, she'd been filled with panic as he bent over her, that hungry look in his eyes. She didn't want to lead him on – what if he despised her now? Had she

just blown her chance of becoming Mrs. Winston Frank?

He certainly didn't look pleased. She glanced at his reddened cheeks as he strode along silently beside her, and felt a pang of regret as he quietly hitched the mare back to the buggy. "I thought we were going to have a picnic," she whispered.

He looked up at the sky. "Storm's coming – we'd best get back before it hits," he said gruffly.

Camilla shrunk inside at the sound. Surely he couldn't be angry with her. She'd done nothing wrong. She couldn't let him kiss her if she didn't intend to marry him, and she wasn't sure about that yet. Yes, he was handsome, strong and would no doubt be a good provider. But she needed more than that. And maybe he would be everything she wanted, but she just didn't know. She needed more time – time to get to know him better, to see how they got along.

Mam had always told her that a woman didn't need time to fall in love, that she'd know the moment the ground gave way beneath her feet. But what did Mam know? She'd ended up married to a drunk who gambled his wages away while his children starved and froze around him. She didn't want to wind up like Mam. She wanted to really get to know Winston, find out for certain whether he was the man she could trust with her future.

They rode back to town in silence as Camilla eyed the black clouds that skidded across the sky above them, squeezing against one another as they vied for space over the narrow valley. She felt as though she might cry. Winston had seemed so warm, caring and concerned on the drive out and when they'd walked together through the clearing. Then in a moment his mood had changed. Now his temper seemed to mimic the sky above them – dark and dangerous.

He pulled the buggy to a stop in front of the Todds' cozy cottage. A wisp of smoke crept skyward from the narrow chimney, and a warm light beckoned through the front window.

"I'm sorry if I upset you," said Camilla, her face turned up and her eyes fixed on his. "I certainly didn't intend to."

"I'm not upset." He forced a smile across his face.

"Really? Because you seem so, though I'm not certain why."

"Camilla, I like you. You know I do. But if you don't feel the same way, you have to tell me."

"I just think we should take some time to get to know each other better, that's all."

He tipped his head to one side. "I know everything I need to about you. Time won't change how I feel."

Her face flushed with heat and she felt her heart thud. "Still, I'd like to spend some time with you before I commit. We don't want to rush in and make a mistake – a lifetime is a long time to live with

something like that.”

“You think it would be a mistake to marry me?” His eyes widened and a muscle tightened in his jaw.

“No, but we’ve hardly spent any time together. What do we really know about each other? This is the first time we’ve been alone together or really had a chance to talk other than at the dance. Did you really think I could marry you after such a brief courtship?”

Camilla’s neck felt like it was on fire, and her heart pounded loudly in her chest. She hated confrontation, especially in a situation like this. She could see her words were wounding Winston, and it brought her no pleasure, but she couldn’t lie to him. He had to know that she wasn’t certain of the way forward. Marriage was a serious business, and now that she’d finally found a man who wanted to marry her, she wasn’t sure she could go through with it.

All of those years of watching Mam’s pain and hardship, loneliness and grief over Da’s actions came rushing back into her mind. She saw Mam crying over an empty larder, rocking hungry babies in her arms, pressing her lips to the forehead of a dead child, working her fingers to the bone to clean, cook, sew, mend, wash and provide for her family ...

She shuddered, and climbed quickly from the buggy before Winston could assist her. “I’m sorry, Winston – I have to go in. I’ll see you soon, I hope.” With a quick wave, she turned away from his clouded face and hurried inside. Closing the door swiftly behind her, she leaned back against it with closed eyes and a loud sigh.

“What is it, my dear?” asked Estelle from the sitting room, her knitting needles raised over her lap.

“Oh, nothing, Aunt Estelle. Winston brought me back because there’s a storm approaching, that’s all.” She forced a smile onto her face and reached up to push a stray curl behind her ear.

“Oh my, what a shame. You two would have had such a lovely time. It’s a pity you had to cut your visit short. Oh well, no doubt he’ll be back before you know it. I saw the look in his eyes – don’t you worry about that.” She smiled and resumed her knitting.

Camilla peeled herself off the door and wandered toward her bedroom. What was wrong with her?! All this time she’d so longed for a family of her own, a husband and children. For months she’d been pining over Winston, daydreaming about the moment he’d lean in to kiss her or run his fingers through her hair, fantasizing about the myriad romantic ways he might ask for her hand. Yet when the time came, all she could think about was Mam and Da, and how much she wanted to run as far away from him as she could get.

She had to snap out of it. Winston was a kind, caring, wonderful man, and any woman would be thrilled to have him as her husband.

When he came calling next – if he ever did – she'd make sure he knew how she truly felt. She just hoped she hadn't succeeded in driving him away.

Chapter Seven

October 1871

Camilla hurried up the long drive, gasping. The last time she'd seen Charlotte, her friend was beside herself over her parents' impending arrival. She'd made Camilla promise to come over before they got there to help her prepare.

And now Camilla was running late. It didn't help that Sam was busy with the wagon and there were no horses for her to borrow – not that she was really comfortable riding a horse yet. So she'd had to walk five miles, and the climb up the steep hill on which the house sat was draining the last of her energy reserves.

Finally she reached the top and paused at the stairs to catch her breath. She hoped she'd beaten them back from town. Since she couldn't see Harry's wagon in its usual place beside the barn, it looked as though she'd made it in time. He must still be in town waiting to greet the stagecoach, thank heavens.

Charlotte had decided not to go with him since she had so much to do at home. And anyway, she'd said, Johnny's nap time coincided with their arrival, so it was better for her to stay with him at the house. The last thing she wanted was to introduce them to their grandson for the first time, only for him to be cranky.

Camilla's breathing slowed, and she climbed the stairs to the porch and entered the front door. "Hello, Charlotte!" she called, peering around in search of her friend.

"In here," called a voice from the kitchen.

Camilla removed her sun hat and coat and hung them by the door, then looked around. The house gleamed, as though it had been scrubbed and scoured from floorboards to ceiling. Charlotte had certainly worked hard to prepare for her parents' visit. She hurried to the kitchen, where Charlotte stood with her hands in a large wooden bowl. Her apron was dusted with flour, as was her brow where she'd wiped it with a whitened hand. "Hi, Char. What are you doin'?"

"Making bread. I thought I had everything ready when I lay Johnny down for his nap, but then I noticed we were out of bread. How could I have missed that? I can't entertain guests without fresh bread." Her face was stricken with panic.

Camilla chuckled beneath her breath. "Oh dear. Charlotte darlin', they're comin' to see you, not eat your bread. I'm sure it'll be dandy.

Calm down, you'll burst a blood vessel."

Charlotte sighed, and Camilla walked around the table to embrace her sister-in-law. "It's all going to be okay. I know you're nervous seein' your parents again, but they must love you a lot to come all this way just to see you, don't you think?"

"You're right, thank you. Honestly, I'm just so surprised they're coming, I don't know what to think. I never imagined them making the trip. I thought I'd never see them again. I'm so glad they're coming, but I feel I have to prove to them that I made the right choice. I gave up marrying a duke and a life of luxury for this. I want to show them that I'm doing well, that I didn't make an enormous mistake. I don't want them to pity me – I want them to be happy for me." She pulled away with a frown, plunged her hands back into the bowl, lifted the dough out onto the table and began kneading it.

"Are you happy, Char?"

Charlotte stopped kneading. Her eyes met Camilla's and she smiled. "Yes, I am. I'm exhausted, sleep-deprived and dreading my parents' arrival, but I'm happy. I have Harry, Johnny and you. I'm living my life the way I want, without anyone telling me what I should or shouldn't do. It's everything I've always wanted. Of course, I miss some things – being able to go riding, and Mary of course. I know she was just the maid, but she was my only true friend back home in England. I could do without laundry and cleaning, but those things are really immaterial to happiness in the end, aren't they?"

"I think so."

"What matters really is that God loves me, I have a family whom I adore, and we're all okay. So I suppose that's the long answer – yes, I'm happy."

"Well then, your parents should be happy for you. You can't worry yourself about the what-ifs and all the possibilities. Just be yourself, unapologetically, and they'll see you've made the right choices. And even if they don't, it's your life and you don't owe anyone an explanation for it."

"You're right, of course. But I do think I owe them an explanation. I ran away from home, their home, without a word, and disappeared from their lives. They deserved better than that, and I feel horrible about it still." She dropped the ball of dough into a bread pan, covered it with a cloth and carried it to the windowsill.

"Perhaps you should apologize."

She paused, then nodded her head. "I know," she whispered.

They heard the trot of hooves outside, and Charlotte's eyes widened. "Oh, they're here! Cammie, help – what should I do?"

Camilla laughed, grabbed a dish cloth and wiped the flour from Charlotte's forehead with a smile. "Take off your apron and go greet

your parents. I'll clean up in here."

"Thank you!" Charlotte grinned, removed her apron and hurried from the room.

"My my – this is all very rustic, isn't it?" Lady Cheryl Beaufort, Charlotte's mother, bustled into the room, the train of her full skirts dusting the floor as she went. She looked a little under the weather; no doubt the coach ride had been tiring. She scanned the room with wide eyes, which soon fell on Camilla standing in the kitchen with a dish towel in her hands.

Camilla set the dish towel onto the kitchen table and hurried over to greet the woman. "Hello, Lady Cheryl. You may remember me – I'm Camilla Brown, Harry's sister."

Lord Edward Beaufort strode over to stand beside his wife, a frown creasing his wide forehead. "Of course, Miss Brown – how nice to see you again. I wonder, do you miss the village, and your mother? Surely you must."

"Yes, your Lordship, I do. I miss home a great deal." Camilla took Lady Cheryl's hand, followed by Lord Edward's, and shook them demurely.

"Well, of course you do," Lady Cheryl sniffed, pulling her gloves off one finger at a time. "I only wish my Charlotte had your sense of loyalty to her own home."

Charlotte and Harry followed them into the room with Mary close behind, and exchanged a nervous glance.

"I hope the journey wasn't too bad," said Camilla as she made her way back into the kitchen to fix drinks.

"Hmph! It was dusty and uncomfortable. I'm glad it's finished." Lord Edward's eyes scanned their surroundings in disbelief.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Father," said Charlotte as she joined Camilla pouring water into cups and setting them on a tray.

"Come into the living room and have a seat," Harry offered. His cheeks were red, and sweat trailed down the sides of his face. Camilla had never seen him so uncomfortable before.

The guests followed him to sit side by side, awkward and erect, on the love seat. Harry sat opposite them in an armchair, and Charlotte handed the drinks around as an uncomfortable silence descended between them.

Finally Lord Edward cleared his throat and narrowed his eyes on Charlotte. "Well, Charlotte my dear., it is good to see you, although I do believe you owe us an apology. Your mother and I were quite put out by your little adventure. The Duke of Notherington was not at all

pleased. He won't receive us, and the scandal your escape caused has been the root of more than one snub in our circle, I can tell you." He grunted and pulled a pipe from his vest pocket, turning it over and over in his hands.

Camilla felt a rush of embarrassment on Charlotte's behalf.

Charlotte nodded. "You are right, Father, I do owe you an apology. What I did was unforgivable, I can see that now. Will you forgive me?"

"Hrumph. Yes, I suppose we already have, but still it's nice to hear you're sorry for your actions."

"I am, Father. And thank you for your forgiveness – it means so much to me." Charlotte's cheeks were red as she took a sip of water.

"Well, here we are," said Lady Cheryl with a roll of her eyes. "And what a journey! I was beginning to believe we'd never make it."

Harry laughed, then covered his mouth in an attempt to turn it into a cough.

"I'm sorry – did I say something amusing?"

"No ... it's just that Charlotte rolls her eyes exactly the same way you just did," Harry pulled at the tie Charlotte had forced him to wear, loosening the knot.

Lord Edward chuckled, "Yes, she does. They look just the same when aggravated. Ha!" The tension was broken by the joke, and everyone seemed to finally relax.

"I was wondering where the servants quarters might be?" asked Mary quietly.

"Sorry, Mary, there aren't any. But you can take Cammie's old room."

Mary nodded, her eyes wide.

"So where is my grandson?" asked Lady Cheryl.

"He's sleeping, although I think I can hear him cooing now." Charlotte stood and hurried from the room, soon returning with Johnny in her arms. "Here he is – this is John Edward Beaufort Brown."

The grandparents both stood, their eyes gleaming. Lady Cheryl raised her hands toward the baby as she drew a deep breath and smiled. Charlotte handed her the baby, and Camilla could see the glisten of unshed tears as Lady Cheryl gazed at her grandson. "He's beautiful! Perfect!" She and Lord Edward fussed and clucked over him, taking turns to rock and talk to him.

Camilla turned back to the kitchen, happy to see the family reunited but wishing her own were here as well. She swallowed hard, her throat tight and her heart racing. She was delighted for Charlotte, but having her parents here only reminded her of what she was missing out on. How she longed to feel her own mother's embrace and hear

her laughter, to hold her little sister in her arms and chase the twins around the living room once more.

She wiped away the tears that fell down her cheeks and reached for the plate holding the tea-cake Charlotte had made earlier. No doubt their guests would enjoy a slice of cake with a cup of hot tea after their journey.

Chapter Eight

Clifford jumped from the back of his gray mare and landed on his feet with a grunt. He paused and tipped his hat back with one finger before hurrying up the stairs to the front door of the Browns' house. As he knocked on the door, he scanned the yard. Harry's wagon was parked by the barn. Two horses rested in the shade of a juniper in the yard beside the barn. He heard the cluck of hens coming from inside it.

The sound of footsteps hastening toward the front door caught his attention, and he spun around to find Camilla as she opened it wide with a look of surprise on her pretty face. "Sheriff, how are you? It's so nice to see you," she gushed. Her cheeks took on a slightly pinker hue.

He removed his hat, and twisted it in his hands. "Cammie ... I wasn't expecting to see you here. I came to speak with Harry and Charlotte."

"Please come in. Charlotte's parents arrived today – they're just getting unpacked in their room and Charlotte's settling Johnny down. But I can take you to see Harry – he's in the living room smoking his pipe. I'm sure he'd love you to join him."

The sheriff nodded and wiped his feet on the doormat before following her inside. She seemed please to see him, although he couldn't be sure she didn't greet everyone the same way. He'd heard about her outings with Winston since the picnic, and had felt a heavy stone of disappointment sink inside him. He hadn't moved quickly enough. What chance did he stand anyway when the competition was Winston Frank? The man was so good-looking even matronly necks twisted to watch him swagger down the street when he came to town.

He shook his head and followed Camilla's slender figure into the living room. Harry was seated in an armchair in front of a roaring fire. His pipe hung from his lips, and his hands were linked behind his head. But he jumped to his feet to shake Clifford's hand. "Clifford, how are you? It's good to see you. Won't you come and share a smoke with me?"

"That sounds grand." He pulled a pipe from his pocket, and Harry handed him some tobacco which he stuffed into the bowl. He lit it and took a deep drag before accepting a seat across from Harry on the sofa. He closed his eyes for a moment, inhaling the pungent smoke and letting it waft from his mouth in a wide billow of gray.

It was time to say what he'd come to say. He hated to be the bearer of bad tidings, but there was none good to share today. He glanced at Harry's contented face and braced himself.

Camilla wondered what had brought the sheriff out to see them. He looked so full of life, it almost seeped from his pores as he sat down, his muscles flexing. She pushed a strand of hair from her eyes, smoothed her skirts and sat beside him, her hands in her lap. He looked at her and she felt her heart jump. His eyes were ice blue under drooping lids, and his chiseled features were accentuated by the firelight.

He blew out a cloud of smoke, then leaned forward with one elbow on his knee. "I wanted to come and see you folks about the Maria Holloway kidnapping."

Harry sat up straight, his eyes narrowed. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry to say there's not much new I can tell you. Heath Moore was out trapping yesterday, and said he saw a group of Lakota riding about five miles south of here, toward Bilton. He thought he saw a white woman with them, though he couldn't say for certain since she was dressed native."

"It had to be Maria!" cried Camilla, her eyes wide.

"We can't be certain." The sheriff took a puff on his pipe. "I spoke to Captain Weston from Fort Smith. He was in town the day before yesterday, and said the Army hadn't been able to find any trace of her. They've made a couple of drives into the Lakota camp, but when they arrive the camp is always abandoned. I guess someone's tipping them off or they're figuring it out somehow. Anyway, he's not giving up, but told me not to get my hopes up. These things often don't end well." He dropped his eyes to the floor and sucked on his pipe in silence.

"You mean they've probably killed her, or soon will, don't you?" whispered Camilla, her hands trembling in her lap.

He glanced up at her with fire in his eyes, but it disappeared as quickly as it had arisen. He drew on the pipe again with a brief nod.

Harry ran his hands through his hair and exhaled loudly. "Well, we have to keep believing she's okay. We can't give up hope. You won't, will you, Sheriff?"

The sheriff stood, tapped his pipe out in the ashtray on the mantle, and shook his head. "I won't give up on her. I hope you enjoy your time with family. Good evening." He spun around, the tails of his overcoat flapping against his legs, and strode to the front door, shoving his hat on his head as he went.

Camilla stood and ran after him, her heart in her throat. "Clifford!"

she cried as he loped down the porch stairs.

He stopped and turned to face her with a look of curiosity. "Cammie, what is it?"

She stood still, embarrassed at her outburst. She didn't know what to say to him, only that she wanted him to stop, to stay a while longer. "I ... well, I ..."

He stepped toward her, looking into her face with that fire in his eyes again. It warmed her, excited her, sent a thrill running through her body. She ran her hands up and down her arms. It was cold outside and her skin was covered in goose pimples, though she wasn't sure it was from the weather or the intensity of those eyes fixed on her. "What is it?" he said in a low voice, his eyes never leaving hers.

She was suddenly very aware of how masculine he was – the strength of his arms, his legs, the tan on his sun-worn skin. She swallowed and opened her mouth to speak, but no words came to her.

"How is Winston?" he asked, breaking the tension between them and fixing it firmly back in place all at once with those three small words.

"Oh ... he's well, thank you."

"Have you seen much of him lately?"

"Yes, he has been calling."

"Well then, I'm happy for you both. Take care, Cammie." He dipped his hat and turned to leave.

She watched him stalk away, his coat tails flapping as he shoved his empty pipe back into his pants pocket. He untied his mare from the fence post and sprang onto her back. She stood rigid as he wheeled the horse around and, with one last look at her, pushed the animal into a gallop down the long drive and back to town.

Chapter Nine

Clifford pressed the Stetson down on his head firmly, and mounted his mare in one leap. Tilly was her name, and she was the best friend he had. With a big heart that pumped warm blood through sturdy veins, and flared nostrils - everything about her bespoke an Arabian heritage, as did her ability to travel miles at top speed while barely breaking a sweat.

He smiled and patted her neck. "Let's go girl."

She surged forward, eager to stretch her legs. They thundered down the main street and out of Cutter's Creek into the lush countryside. Their headlong pace startled a family of raccoons foraging by the side of the road, and the critters scuttled away to find some undergrowth in which to hide, their black-and-white faces bobbing through the tall grasses.

He'd decided he'd waited long enough for the U.S. Army to find Maria Holloway. It was time he did some investigating of his own. Captain Weston had warned him against it, not wanting the sheriff to spark a battle that might turn into a full-blown war with Gray Wolf, the Lakota chief. The skirmishes with Gray Wolf had made it tough getting supplies into Cutter's Creek, and the Army had all but closed the Bozeman Trail entirely, diverting traffic along a different route.

Too many battles, too much death, too many loads of valuable foodstuffs lost to the natives - and Cutter's Creek was beginning to feel the pinch. He wasn't too worried - vendors always found a way to satisfy their customers, and the Army was doing its best to make sure they didn't starve. But they'd have to do without some of life's luxuries, like powders and soaps, fresh fruit and varieties of fabrics. Only essentials were making it to town these days, and it wouldn't be long before all the inhabitants became aware of the loss.

But he didn't intend to do anything about that today. Today, he wanted to find some evidence of where they were keeping Maria Holloway. He'd just keep his head down and do his best not to be seen. Surely there could be no harm in that.

He slowed the mare to a gentle canter and soaked in the peacefulness of his surroundings. He always loved to get out on horseback into nature, away from town, just him and his mount. There was nothing quite like being all alone in a countryside few white men had ever seen. The journeys he'd taken in earlier years into entirely undiscovered territory had been even more invigorating,

albeit with the need for constant vigilance since one never knew what you might find in such places. Every animal encountered was the first he'd ever seen, every village a mystery, each prairie full of the unknown. The love of adventure was in his blood, and Montana Territory was nothing if not full of the possibility of adventure.

The sudden beating of pheasants' wings filled the air and a bevy of birds rose up, startling Tilly. She shied sideways and reared on her hind legs. He held on tight and watched the birds resettle in the grasses some way off, his heart pounding in his chest. He was on edge today, and even more so the closer he came to Lakota territory.

His thoughts returned, as they often did these days, to Camilla Brown. He couldn't help feeling as though he no longer had any hope. She and Winston had been seeing each other for some time now, and he knew when to admit defeat. Not that he'd really fought for her. His face blazed as the thought filled his mind. Why hadn't he ? He shouldn't have let her go without at least trying to win her affection.

He shook his head, and clenched his jaw tight. He knew why he hadn't courted her.

Marlene's death had hit him hard, harder than he would have thought possible given they'd only known each other a short time. But he'd fallen for her, and intended to ask for her hand at the first possible moment after delivering Craddock and the other outlaws to Cheyenne. But he'd never gotten the chance. For years his heart had been hardened against the idea of love or marriage, and he'd never found another woman he wanted to open his heart to.

Until Camilla. She'd just arrived in Cutter's Creek three years ago with a small wagon train of folks who'd braved the Bozeman Trail together . Shaken after their encounter with the Lakota, she'd sat quietly while her brother Harry recounted Maria Holloway's kidnapping and her husband's murder. But still and heartbroken as she was, his eyes kept traveling to her face, those wide blue eyes full of pain, the freckles that danced across a dainty upturned nose. She reminded him of Marlene in so many little ways. His palms had grown damp, and he had to keep repeating his questions to Harry.

Ever since, he'd told himself that it was a crush, nothing more. It wasn't in her best interests to be married to a sheriff – look what had happened to the last woman he'd loved. It had been his fault – she was on her way to see him. And because he was a lawman, that had taken her directly into harm's way. He couldn't bear to place Camilla in danger as he had with Marlene. He'd chosen his path, and that it would be lonely was something he'd grown accustomed to. Could he really change now? Even if she grew to love him, could he truly open himself up to loving her the way she deserved?

Well, it didn't matter now one way or the other. Camilla was likely

to soon be engaged to Winston, and so much the better for her. He would make a fine, safe choice. No doubt he'd treat her well and she'd be happy. He pressed on down the trail, pushing all thoughts of her from his head. It was time he concentrated on the task at hand: finding Maria.

He spent the entire day scouring the Bozeman Trail and its surroundings without luck. There was no sign of any natives, and certainly no English captives. Having packed enough supplies to last several days, he decided not to return to town but instead continued on toward Bilton. He still had friends in the sheriff's office there, and maybe they'd be able to help.

He hated to consider what had happened to Maria since her abduction all those months ago. It was likely she was no longer in this world, but had moved on to the next. Even so, he knew how much not knowing pained Camilla, and though he didn't feel as though he could pursue her heart, this was one thing he could do for her. He could find Maria Holloway. He might not have been able to stop Wild Clay Craddock for Marlene's sake. But he could rescue Maria for Camilla's – or die trying.

Chapter Ten

Clifford was tired. He rubbed his weary eyes and urged Tilly onward. His time in Bilton hadn't yielded any results. His old friend Sheriff Gillard was still at the helm, but time and age had reduced him to more of a figurehead. His deputies were the true arm of the law in Bilton, and they didn't respond well to an outsider, especially one who'd worked in that office prior to them.

Gillard had welcomed him with open arms and a warm smile, taking him home for supper where his wife Betty had waited on him and fussed over him like no one had in a long time. It felt nice to be cared for by a woman. But the sheriff had no information on Maria Holloway. In fact, he said Clifford should give up the search as pointless. She was most likely dead, or injured in one way or another beyond the point of rescue. After so many months with those savages, she'd be lost to civilization, and there was no point trying to bring her back.

The deputies had been even less help, and none were ready to join him in tracking down the Lakota. They kept to their side of the invisible line drawn by Gray Wolf, so long as he kept to his. From their point of view that was a fine way to live, and they stood by it. Clifford was a fool, they said, to try to find the chief whom even the Army wasn't able to whip. And he'd likely die a violent death at the hands of the savages if he didn't see reason and keep out of trouble.

He shook his head, remembering their words, and lifted the collar of his coat against the cool morning air. On his way home to Cutter's Creek, he pondered what his next step should be. He didn't intend to heed their advice, but he knew he had to be cautious whatever he did. If he found her, what then? He hadn't thought that far ahead, still looking to get some inkling of where she might be. If he found her, then he'd come up with a plan, and maybe the Army would help.

He lifted the hat from his head and ran his fingers through his hair before returning it to its place with a deep sigh. He wondered what Camilla was doing. Did she even know he'd left town? It wasn't likely – not seeing him for several days wouldn't be unusual, and he was certain she wouldn't ask about him.

There had to be something he could do to get her out of his head once and for all. Would he live the rest of his days with regret over her? Thoughts of her with Winston – kissing him, marrying him, building a life and family with him – were torture to him now. How

would he feel when it actually came true? No, he had to banish thoughts like that. They would do him no good – if she couldn't be his, he'd have to find something else to occupy his mind.

Maybe it was time to focus on what he'd been trying to do for almost a decade – capture Wild Clay Craddock. The outlaw had escaped too many times to count over the years. The Pinkertons were on his trail now, but he kept track of their pursuit when he had the chance. The last he'd heard was that Craddock and several members of his gang had been seen down in Arizona Territory. Maybe he should head down there and finally put the scoundrel away for good.

That the journey would take him far away from Camilla Brown was an added benefit.

A noise up ahead on the trail caught his ear, and he pulled Tilly to a stop. It was the sound of wagon wheels turning on hardened ground. He caught the low murmur of human voices drifting back to him on the chill breeze and hurried forward at a trot, soon confirming his guess – there was a wagon train up ahead.

Three wagons made up the train, flanked on all sides by Army cavalry. They drove close together, the armed guards looking around with darting eyes and rifles at the ready. They saw Clifford before he was close, and two soldiers rode to meet him. "Good morning, sir. Where're you headed to?" asked one, greasy hair tickling the top of his soiled collar.

"Morning. I'm Sheriff Clifford Brentwood of Cutter's Creek, Montana Territory. Just on my way home from Bilton."

"You do know, Sheriff, that the Bozeman Trail is closed?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. I don't generally use it, but just thought it would be the swiftest way to Bilton. Of course I've been very careful not to attract any unwanted attention along the way, I assure you."

The soldiers nodded and motioned for him to follow them. When they reached the wagons, Clifford fell in with them between the last two vehicles. The mood was somber, and everyone seemed on edge, likely waiting for an attack.

One came just after noon, when a silent arrow wedged itself with a thud in the chest of a soldier riding alongside Clifford. His mare reared on her hind legs and danced sideways as his eyes flew wide with horror. Clifford reached to catch the man as he fell, but he was too far from him. The wagons drew closer together still, with the soldiers lining up around them, rifles at the ready. Clifford in the middle watched with wary eyes as he pulled his own rifle from his saddlebag, already loaded.

The natives broke into yowls and yelps as they attacked the group, their painted faces otherworldly and terrifying emerging from the dense woods. Clifford and the soldiers all fired their weapons and

hurried to reload. Their attackers slid back into the woods and out again, dodging and diving as it took their fancy, shooting arrows and howling – that wretched noise filling the woods around them.

The skirmish was short but intense, and the warriors soon withdrew on their painted ponies to a nearby rise overlooking the trail. Several climbed down from their mounts and lifted their loin cloths to wave their naked rears at the soldiers. Most of the guards ran after them, certain they'd won this victory and determined to finish the battle. The warriors disappeared over the rise, and Clifford watched in disbelief and dismay as the soldiers followed, leaving the wagons virtually unguarded.

He urged Tilly forward into a line of junipers that flanked one side of the trail. He trotted silently along the edge of the woods toward the rise, cresting on one end of it. From his vantage point beneath the great evergreens, he saw the soldiers had all been slaughtered and left in a mound by the great number of Lakota warriors who had no doubt been waiting for them just out of sight. Now, however, the Lakota had left, with only the dimpled hoofprints of their ponies in the reddened mud to show where they'd been.

Clifford glanced back at the wagon train to see a group of warriors already there, killing those who remained and loading horses with supplies from the wagons. He lifted his rifle, then lowered it again, drawing a deep breath. There was nothing he could do now – all the soldiers and traders were dead. With so many Lakota, he'd only be able to fire one or two rounds before being killed by a well-placed arrow or spear.

He lifted his hat and wiped the sweat off his forehead with his shirtsleeve. His heart hammered loudly in his chest, and his skin felt clammy and cold even under the warm noonday sun. What a terrible thing it was. He could scarce believe it had happened so quickly and with nothing he could do to change it. Somehow he'd escaped unharmed, at least thus far. Had he not left the wagons when he did, he'd be dead as well.

These were the same Lakota who'd kidnapped Maria Holloway, he was sure. His mind raced. Since they hadn't seen him, perhaps it was a fine opportunity to follow them and see where they camped. But even as it crossed his mind, he knew it was foolish. How could he follow Lakota warriors to their home without being noticed? And when they saw him, his luck would run out very quickly.

But was it luck that had drawn him away from the wagon train? Was it luck that had kept him out of harm's way?

He'd never been one to think much about God. His mother had always told him Bible stories and insisted he say his prayers each night, but he'd left home at such a young age. After the adventures of

the West, those habits had fallen by the wayside as he fell into new ways of thinking and doing.

But at this moment on the trail to Cutter's Creek, he felt compelled to pray for the first time in a long time. The prayer slipped from a grateful and grieving heart in the midst of the pain he felt over those fallen all around him. He leaned low over Tilly's neck and kicked her forward – slowly, to trail the warriors as they pulled their laden ponies by short ropes away from the trail and into the dense forest beyond.

Clifford tracked them for hours as they laughed and joked among themselves, no doubt retelling stories of their own heroism. Finally, just after sunset, they entered a large clearing, on the far edge of which he could see smoke winding a welcome into the darkening sky above them – the Lakota camp. In the failing light, the structures in the distance were dark smudges between black trees, with only the faint glow of fire pinpricking the darkness.

He dismounted and ordered Tilly to stay, then crept forward through the thick grasses, careful to make as little noise as possible. As he neared the camp, he saw a group of women huddled around one of the fires, mixing, cutting and poking at something as they prepared the evening meal. One face appeared pale beside the others, her light hair standing out in contrast to the darkness, her porcelain complexion glowing.

Maria!

A dog barked on the far side of the camp, and he froze in place, listening. A shout, and the warriors he'd been following ran back into the clearing toward him. One leaped onto the back of a nearby pony, spun it around and galloped toward Clifford with a wild yelp. He'd been spotted.

He ran to Tilly, vaulted onto her back and spurred her forward with a kick of his heels against her sturdy sides. She was soon galloping, leaving the native and his pony far behind. But he didn't slow her for a full hour, until he was certain they wouldn't be caught. By then, both their breaths came in ragged bursts, and he had clutched so tightly to the reins that his knuckles were white and his fingers tingled.

He patted Tilly's neck, loosening the reins so she could stretch out and walk slowly the rest of the way home. It was dark and they had hours of travel ahead of them. Normally at this time of night he'd set up camp on the side of the trail, but not tonight, not with Lakota tracking him. He'd keep moving until they were home.

He found himself praying again, thanking God for Tilly, who had the stamina of ten horses. Already her labored breathing had slowed to normal and she seemed ready to run again. He smiled. Two prayers

of thanks in one day. Wonders never cease.

His eyes traveled to the stars above. The brilliance of their light shone so brightly that it lit his path and gave him a sense of ease as he and Tilly plodded homeward. It truly was an amazing world he lived in – not only were the heavens comely, but the glow provided enough light to travel by. Another thing to be thankful for, even in the midst of turmoil.

I made them for you.

Clifford startled, his eyes widening.

I could have placed lights in the sky only to see by, but I made a beautiful blanket of stars so you could enjoy them as well. They're for you. All for you. Ask me how much I love you.

The voice he heard was small and quiet, yet definitely not of his own mind. His mouth fell open, and he drew in a quick, short breath. “H-how much do you love m-me?” he whispered into the night’s silence.

I made every single star for your pleasure. That’s how much I love you.

Clifford felt the prick of tears behind his eyes and swallowed a lump that had formed in his throat. “Thank you,” he said aloud, for the third time that day.

Chapter Eleven

Camilla had prayed a lot lately.

Winston had returned to see her, even after the conversation when she thought she might have driven him away. It seemed he was determined to win her heart. The time they spent together, talking about God and marveling together at all He'd done in both their lives, had reminded her just how much she'd relied on Him in the most difficult moments.

She felt guilty for only turning to God when things weren't going well, and with Winston's encouragement she'd begun a regimen of rising early to spend time in the Bible and in prayer. After only a few weeks, she was already beginning to feel a peace she'd never before experienced in her life. Now she turned to God throughout the day as well, talking to Him about anything and everything on her mind.

Lately, that had often meant Sheriff Brentwood. The previous evening, she'd prayed for him before bed. Then after she'd been asleep for several hours, she'd awoken with a start and felt the need to do so again. Her heart had burned in her chest, and the intensity of it had kept her awake for hours on her knees by her bedside.

Her pulse raced as she thought of him again. She couldn't seem to get him out of her head. She was supposed to be thinking of Winston. She was seeing him again later tonight, and she liked him, she really did. He was kind to her, and good, thoughtful and handsome. So why did Clifford continue to push his way into her thoughts unbidden? What was wrong with her?

She yawned wide and, holding the bridle close to her side, walked toward Sally, Charlotte's chestnut mare. Harry had bought Sally to replace Charlotte's beloved steed Amber, though Charlotte had refused to name the animal the same.

Camilla had decided it was time to learn to ride. She'd ridden a few times in the past, but always awkwardly and in fear of her life. Charlotte was inside the house settling Johnny, and no doubt would take a nap herself – he usually did at this time of day. Her parents were resting in their room and Harry was at work. Camilla had some time to herself, and she was determined to overcome her fear of horses.

Of course, Charlotte had offered to help her, but she wanted to do it herself. All her life, she'd had to help others – family, friends, neighbors – and never gotten to do anything for herself. She wanted to

do this on her own, this one thing. She felt as though so many things were outside her control, but not this.

She narrowed her eyes and slunk closer to the mare. “There, there, Sally. Come now, girl. We’re goin’ to have a mite of a ride, just a tad. Come now, girl.” She slipped the bridle over the horse’s head, her hands shaking. She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath, her heart pounding so hard it was making her head light. I can do this ...

She didn’t know how to saddle the horse, so she’d decided just to try bareback – it couldn’t be any harder than riding with a saddle, could it?. Sure, there would be no knobbly thing to hold onto, but she could just clutch the horse’s mane with both hands. That ought to do the trick. She pulled the reluctant animal over to the fence and climbed up onto the second railing, then with an awkward leap sailed onto the horse’s back and landed with a cry.

Sally let out a short whinny and reared up on her hind legs. Camilla leaned forward and grasped large handfuls of mane, her legs clenching the horse’s sides in a desperate attempt to cling to her back. As soon as the mare’s front hooves landed on solid ground, she took off, riding around the outside of the yard, tossing her head low and snorting.

Camilla held on for dear life, spurred into mindless prayer – repeating “God help me, God help me!” over and over. Her red curls flew out behind her, and her long skirts billowed around her stockinged legs as she rode around the yard in a wide circle. “Whoa, Sally!” she cried, but the horse didn’t slow her headlong pace. “Whoa!”

She pulled on the reins, but one side fell slack against the mare’s neck, and all her strength was channeled into a sharp tug on the other. Sally turned sharply to the left, directly into the tall fence, and stopped short with a burst of hot air from her flared nostrils. Camilla went sailing over her shoulder, landing with a thud on her rear end.

The wind knocked from her lungs, Camilla rolled onto her back and lay looking up at the sky, unsure of what to do next. Was she hurt? She couldn’t quite tell, but she wanted to laugh. Imagining how she must have looked, flying around the yard on the mare’s back, clinging with both hands while her rear bounced frightfully all over the place, her skirts flying high ... she began to giggled, then laugh until her sides ached, rolling back and forth in the mud with the clear blue sky above her.

Sally sniffed her curiously, then wandered off.

“Oh, I can’t breathe,” Camilla cried before falling again into uncontrollable laughter.

Just then a head appeared above her, obscuring her view of the sky. “Everything okay here, Miss Brown?” Sheriff Clifford Brentwood asked with a wry smile.

She stopped laughing immediately and pushed herself to her feet with a gasp. "Fine, thank you, Sheriff." Her cheeks were on fire, and she smoothed her skirts as best she could. As her hands reached the back of her skirts, they passed over something warm and wet. She twisted to look behind her and squeaked in dismay. "Oh no!"

"What is it?" asked Clifford, walking around behind her to look. "Oh dang." He covered a snort of laughter with one hand and bit his lower lip. "My my, Miss. Brown, you seem to have a little something on your ... your dress ..." He looked at the ground, obviously trying to control himself.

She'd landed in horse manure, and it was now smeared across the breadth of her skirts and her hands as well. The stench drifted into her nostrils, and she grimaced in disgust. She frowned at Clifford and stamped her foot, her blue eyes snapping. "Well, I certainly didn't need you to tell me that. And I'd appreciate you showin' a little bit o' grace!"

Her indignation appeared to be too much for him to bear, and he doubled over in laughter, slapping his thighs in his mirth.

She felt anger rising in her belly, and lifted her hands firmly to her hips. How dare he laugh at her like that? He should be chivalrous and come to her aid, help her inside and avert his eyes from the mess she'd landed in. But no, instead he was overcome with laughter, and at her expense! It was ungentlemanly, and she wasn't going to stand for it. "I insist you stop laughin' at me this instant!" she exclaimed with another stamp.

Unfortunately, her action caused a wad of manure to plop from the back of her skirt to the ground behind her. She stepped back, felt it squelch beneath her boot. With a grimace, she lifted her foot, dancing in place as she tried in vain to shake it free.

The little jig simply made the sheriff laugh all the harder and he bent over, gasping for air. "Stop, I can't take anymore! You've got to stop, please, Cammie – I'll burst my buttons!"

Her eyelids lowered, she wrinkled her nose, stepped toward him and rubbed her hands down the length of his shirt sleeves with glee, leaving a trail of stinking brown dung on the plaid fabric. When he looked up at her, she smirked and returned her hands to her hips. That would teach him to laugh at her! Now he smelled as bad as she did.

That stopped his laughing, and while a smile still lurked at the corners of his mouth, his eyes grew dark. He stepped toward her menacingly. She moved away, suddenly feeling less certain about the lesson she'd deemed fit to teach him. He moved closer still, rapidly now, backing her up until she was pressed firmly against the fence palings that encircled the yard.

Clifford reached her and stopped. She didn't understand the look on his face. He wasn't angry, but there was a darkness lurking beneath the surface that she hadn't seen before. But for the faint smile on his face, she'd have been worried.

He lifted his hands and placed them on the fence rail on either side of her.

"Clifford, what're you ...?" He didn't answer, and she didn't finish the sentence. She gazed into his eyes, getting lost in the blue depth of them, and shivered from head to toe. Desire filled her and she drew in a deep breath, holding it in silence.

He leaned forward, his eyes straying to her lips, his hands still blocking her on each side. "Cammie," he whispered.

She closed her eyes and exhaled, just before his lips met hers – softly at first, pressing gently. Then with tender nibbles and wanderings, his lips explored hers. She let herself go, her hands stealing up behind his neck. She threaded them through the hair curling from beneath his hat and used it to pull him closer, deeper. The kiss grew more urgent, and she felt a deep hunger grow within her as he pressed himself hard against her bodice.

He pulled away, his pupils dilated, his breath hot against her skin. She felt drunk on the pleasure of his lips, and her eyelids dipped heavy against her cheeks as she blinked, trying to get her bearings.

"Clifford..."

"Yes?"

"I... I don't think it's a good idea that we kiss when we're not... um..." Her mind was blank. She couldn't focus with his lips still so close to hers.

"Really?" He arched an eyebrow and grinned. "Seems to me you thought it a fine idea a few seconds ago."

He leaned forward, his eyes betraying an eagerness for more. But Camilla raised her palms to his chest, and pushed against him. Confusion drifted across his features, and then away again.

"Is it because of Winston? You're in love with him, aren't you?" His eyes narrowed and he pressed his lips together into a thin line.

"No, I'm not in love with Winston, but there is an understanding of sorts between us, and..."

"You're gonna marry him?" His voice was incredulous, and he ran a hand over his eyes with a quick release of breath.

"No... I mean yes... Oh, I don't know. You're confusing me. I thought I knew what I wanted, but now I'm all befuddled."

"I'm not," he said. "I want you Cammie. It's that simple. So, you let me know when you've figured it out, okay?" His eyes hardened and he stepped back. "I'm sorry." He turned and walked away, leaving Camilla weak-kneed against the fence.

Chapter Twelve

Charlotte watched Sheriff Brentwood leave with wide eyes. Had he really just kissed Camilla in the horse yard, or was she still asleep and dreaming? Camilla was being courted by Winston, wasn't she? When did she start seeing the sheriff? And why hadn't she said anything about it? She rubbed her tired eyes and wandered down the hall to the living room. Johnny was still sleeping peacefully in her bedroom and she didn't want to disturb him.

Her mother sat on the loveseat in the living room, working on a needlepoint piece that showed Beaufort Manor and the surrounding countryside in a brilliant pattern of greens, grays and browns. She smiled wryly – the sight brought back so many memories of home, but she also felt a small knot of pain form in her stomach.

The homesickness had taken her by surprise the first time she'd felt it – she'd always assumed she'd be relieved to leave the past behind. But now she was used to that feeling – it came whenever she thought of home, of what she'd left behind, and how she'd abandoned her family. But it left just as easily when she held her boy in her arms, or thought of Harry's handsome, smiling face.

"Hello, Mother," she said, sitting primly beside her mother on the seat and smoothing her disheveled hair with her hands.

Her mother glanced at her in disapproval. "Charlotte my dear, you look as though you've been run over by a buggy. You might not have the social life you once did, but you still have an image to maintain."

Charlotte rolled her eyes and fought the urge to poke her tongue at her mother. "Well, I feel like I've been run over by a buggy too, if that's any consolation." She slumped against the back of the love seat, and sighed deeply.

Her mother smiled tightly and her eyes fell on Charlotte again. "I thought I might polish your silver for you, dear, after tea this evening – you know, since you still haven't seen fit to hire servants and Mary is busy scrubbing the floor of that quaint little scullery of yours."

Charlotte groaned inwardly. "Mother, we can't afford servants, as you well know. And we don't have any silver, so there's no need. But I do appreciate the offer."

Lady Cheryl paused with her needle high above the cloth, her eyebrows arched in alarm. "No silver? How on earth do you suppose you'll entertain guests properly without silver?"

"We entertain them just fine, Mother. We don't have any princes,

dukes or duchesses in Cutter's Creek. Sam and Estelle, Jack and Willow, Amos and Agatha Waverley – none of them have silver, so they certainly don't mind dining here without it. I know this is completely foreign to you, Mother, but everything here is different. It's not Beaufort Manor, or Cambria, or England. We're on the very edge of civilization, and all the graces you're used to just don't matter here."

Her mother stared at her, her mouth ajar, then resumed her needlepoint with a huff. "It wouldn't hurt for you to act like you're still civilized, my dear. Even if all else around you is wild."

"Mother! Please don't come into my home and call me uncivilized. Just because my life is different to the one you planned for me ..."

"Different! Different?! It's unrecognizable!" Lady Cheryl's eyes flooded with tears, and she dropped the needlepoint to the floor. "I don't know what to do, what to say. You've changed so much I barely recognize you. Everything I say is wrong, everything I do ... you take it all the wrong way. I just want ..."

Charlotte sighed and sat straight, taking her mother's hands in hers. "What do you want, Mother?"

"I just want you to be happy."

"I am happy."

Lady Cheryl dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief she pulled from her skirt pocket. "You are?"

"Yes. I am. I don't regret my choices, Mother. As hard as that may be for you to understand."

"You just seem so unhappy, my darling. I was worried you'd made a terrible mistake." She sniffled into the handkerchief.

She laughed and patted her mother's hands. "Not unhappy, Mother, just tired and pregnant. I'm happy despite that, if that makes sense."

"I suppose it does." Her mother laughed along with her. "And I'm glad to hear it. Because I have something I've been meaning to tell you."

"Oh?"

"Father and I wanted to tell you together, but he's out inspecting potential investment properties with Harry and I think this is as good a time as any ..."

"What is it, Mother? You're scaring me."

"We're staying."

Charlotte's eyebrows arched in surprise. "What? What do you mean?"

"Here, in Cutter's Creek. Your father and I have decided to stay. We're not going back home to England."

Charlotte's hand flew to her mouth as she stood. Her throat felt choked, and she sucked in a quick deep breath. "But what about the

manor? Who will take care of it? What about your heritage, Father's lineage."

"Oh darling, you are Father's lineage. And you left. There's nothing for us there anymore. We rented the manor to that Plimpton fellow who's always had his eye on the place – he's living there now, happy as a lark. And we get to go anywhere we like. It's good for us both."

"But Mother, I thought you loved Cambria. I didn't think you'd ever leave the manor."

"Well, things change."

"What kind of things?"

"You, for one. When you left, I realized my whole life was wrapped up in you in various ways. I felt quite empty with you gone. And then ... well, I'm sick, my dear."

"Sick?"

"Yes. Dying, actually – that's what the physician said. So I decided I wanted to spend what time I had left with you, my darling daughter. Your father feels the same. Mary has been a dear, caring for me so well on the journey here. So here we are, and here we'll stay."

Charlotte's eyes filled with tears, and her chest constricted. She choked back a sob and sat again to take her mother's hands. "You're dying?" she whispered.

Her mother nodded, her eyes shining with unshed tears. "Yes, although I still feel quite well at the moment. It comes and goes."

"But you can't die! You look so strong and healthy. And I need you." Charlotte burst into sobs and threw her arms around her mother's neck, crying into her shoulder. "Please don't die, Mother! I just got you back, and I don't know what I'd do without you. I know I'm not a very good daughter, and I get so frustrated with you at times, but I love you, really I do. You can't leave me!"

Lord Edward strode into the house through the front door, an empty pipe in one hand. "Have either of you seen the flint ... oh!"

They both looked at him with tears in their eyes and wet cheeks.

"I see you've told her then," he said, pushing the pipe into his vest pocket and walking to join them. He sat beside Charlotte and patted her hand, his round face full of compassion. "There there, my dear girl. I know how upsetting this news must be to you. It certainly was to me. But let's try to enjoy this time together, shall we? We don't want your mother's last days to be full of tears, now do we?"

Charlotte couldn't remember the last time he'd looked at her with so much love and understanding. "Yes, Father. Of course – I will do everything I can to make sure this time is as full of joy and happiness as possible. Though I can't promise no tears."

Her mother patted her back, stroked her hair and comforted her. They sat for many minutes with their arms around the other,

whispering words of love . And the knot in Charlotte's stomach grew and grew until she wasn't sure she could stand it any longer. She knew that she would never see the world the same way again.

Chapter Thirteen

Winston helped Camilla out of the buggy, and she stopped to straighten her hat. It was pinned into her hair, but several of the hairpins pulled painfully. She adjusted them, sighing with relief as the pain subsided. "So how are the shoats – still growin'?"

He nodded, grinning, and offered her his arm. "They're growing like the little piglets they are, eating up a storm. I sometimes think they'll eat me out of house and home, then I remember they're what'll pay for my home. Well, the home I'm planning on building when the time is right."

"Oh? You mean the farm house you're livin' in isn't where you'll stay?" asked Camilla, one eyebrow arched.

"No. When I marry, I don't plan on sharing a house with my brother. He can have the farmhouse, and I'll build another for my family to live in. Something bigger, grander. My fiancée should have a say in how it's put together, I'd reckon, since it'll be her home as well come the wedding day ..."

Camilla felt her cheeks flush under his meaningful gaze. He obviously intended to ask for her hand soon and was testing her, trying to ascertain her feelings on the matter. The problem was, she still didn't know. In her head, she understood Winston was a good match for her and would make a good husband. But there was the matter of her kiss with Clifford the previous day – a kiss she hadn't been able to stop reliving in her thoughts, and her dreams, since. "Well, that sounds lovely."

He ducked his head with a grin as they reached the porch of the small cottage behind the chapel.

"Harry built this porch for Jack and Willow, you know," boasted Camilla, desperately trying to change the topic of conversation, her eyes flitting over the timber structure – the sturdy railings, intricately carved trim and shining white paint.

"Oh? He did a fine job on it." Winston knocked on the door.

It opened to reveal Willow Carlson, her pregnant belly drooping beneath a full skirt. "Winston, Camilla, do come on in. It's such a lovely evening, don't you think?" They followed her into the house, and she took their coats, scarves and hats to hang by the front door. "Fall has finally arrived – I just love this time of year," she continued as she waddled into the small sitting room where the rest of the Bible study group was seated.

“Yes, the colors are wonderful,” agreed Camilla, her eyes scanning the group. Willow’s husband Jack sat in an armchair, a smile on his face and a Braille Bible open in his lap. Justin was seated beside Harry. Heath Moore was there with his latest beau, Beatrice Honeywell, whose blonde ringlets fell in cascades down the sides of her face and who giggled for no apparent reason as Camilla and Winston greeted everyone.

“Where is Molly?” asked Camilla, looking around for the Carlsons’ bright, pretty little girl.

Willow sighed and sat heavily in a burgundy armchair beside her husband. “In bed, thank heavens. Two-year-olds are a handful and a half, I can tell you.”

They started on the study, about Daniel’s faith as he waited for God to answer his prayers. It made Camilla think of all the prayers she’d prayed over the years, asking for an escape from the hardship of her life in Greyburn and for a family of her own. It was the first time she considered that God had answered the first prayer, and was about to answer the second. She felt a rush of happiness and peace fill her soul.

Why am I so quick to remember the things You haven’t done for me, God? she thought. And yet when You answer my prayers, I forget to give You the glory. Thank You for giving me a new life away from the drudgery of Greyburn. I know I asked so many times, but now all I can think about is how much I miss it. How much I miss them - my family, my friends, my home. I’m sorry for being so ungrateful. You answered my prayer, and I praise You for it.

Tears filled her eyes as she prayed silently. Jack Carlson continued the discussion of Daniel’s faith while her thoughts buzzed around inside her head. God had been good to her. Things may not have worked out the way she’d imagined, but she decided that she would make the most of what she’d been given. After all, her freedom was what she’d longed for, and now she had it.

Whatever choices she made about her future, whether she chose Winston, Clifford, or someone else entirely to spend her life with, she could celebrate that she was free to choose. That in itself was truly a blessing. There were many times in past years when things didn’t look quite as bright as they did now, even times when she wasn’t sure they’d survive. But here she was, in the warm, inviting home of a friend, enjoying a time of Bible study together.

Her gaze fell on Winston as her heart surged with gratitude. Perhaps this moment was God’s way of prompting her to consider Winston a blessing from Him as well. He was everything she’d ever asked for in a potential husband and more.

He looked up and caught her eye. His eyes crinkled, and the corner of his mouth turned up in a wry smile as he cocked his head to one side and raised an eyebrow as if to say, *what are you thinking of?* She shook her head and returned his smile. Yes, she could imagine building a life with Winston Frank. What about Clifford – could she imagine a life

with him as well?

Her eyes widened and her smile faded as realization dawned. The problem wasn't that she couldn't picture marrying Clifford Brentwood. The problem was that she could. They were both good men. And she didn't know which one to choose.

Chapter Fourteen

Clifford watched from the porch of the sheriff's office as Winston and Camilla returned to Sam and Estelle's house after the Bible study at the Carlson's. He sat in darkness, rocking in a timber chair, a lit pipe between his lips, his feet crossed at the ankles and resting on the porch rail. As they reached to the front door, they smiled and laughed together, the low murmur of their voices carrying back to him on the still evening air.

He couldn't make out what they were saying, but he saw the dip of Winston's head, and the happy jaunt of Camilla's gate. She opened the front door, said something to her beau ... and he nodded, removed his hat and stepped into the warmly-lit house.

When the door closed behind them, Clifford stood and pulled the collar of his coat up higher around his neck. He took another puff from the pipe and blew a cloud of smoke into the air, obscuring his view of the Todds' cozy home. She looked happy, and he was glad for that. But if that were really true, why this tug at his heart? Why did it feel as though he'd lost something?

He certainly hadn't lost Camilla, since she'd never been his. He'd been so careful not to get his hopes up about her – until that kiss. Now here he was, pining away for her in the darkness. His breath caught in his throat, and he coughed. It felt as though something had pierced his chest and was cutting deep into his heart – the heart that hammered whenever she brushed close to him, or spoke to him, or gave him that half-smile that made her eyes sparkle and her cheeks dimple.

He tapped out the pipe over the porch railing, and sighed deeply. *You can't lose what you don't have.* He kept telling himself that, as if repetition would somehow burn it into his brain and he'd be free of her.

Never mind. He had plenty of work to do to keep himself occupied. He'd heard rumors some members of Wild Clay Craddock's gang had been spotted in Wyoming Territory in recent days. He'd volunteered to run a criminal from Cheyenne up to Bozeman where the man was wanted for theft and murder, hoping that he could discover something useful about Craddock's whereabouts at the same time. He hadn't been able to pin the outlaw down in nearly a decade, and his fingers itched to hold a pistol to the varmint's head.

It would be a long journey alone, but he didn't mind riding, and he didn't mind being by himself. It'd give him a chance to consider his future with an uncluttered mind, including whether or not he should

stay in Cutter's Creek. He never thought he'd leave the place, since it was where he'd lived the longest since he left Philadelphia all those years ago.

But now he didn't know if he could bear to stay. It was only a matter of time until Camilla became engaged to Winston. They'd marry and start a family, and he'd run into her in the street with a brood of younguns buzzing around her feet, and his heart would ache in that horrible way it had just now. He didn't know if he could stand to feel that ache so often.

So this trip was his chance to think it through. He'd often considered heading further north to Canada, just to see what was up there. Or perhaps he'd go west to California – he'd heard tales of fertile lands, snow-white beaches, and mammoth veins of undiscovered gold there. But even as the thoughts drifted through his mind, his stomach lurched at the idea of leaving his home and everyone he cared about. He suddenly felt much older than his thirty-two years.

I'm getting old, he thought with a wan smile in the darkness. Old and sentimental.

Chapter Fifteen

November 1871

Camilla dismounted, tied the bay gelding to the fence post, and lifted her skirts to run to the front door of Harry and Charlotte's split-log house. Harry had come for her, and she'd ridden Sam's horse all the way from Cutter's Creek, bouncing and jouncing painfully on the hard saddle the entire way, holding onto the pommel with all her strength to stop from falling. He strode ahead of her into the house, and she followed close behind.

The baby was coming!

Charlotte would need help with the birthing, and Dr. Potter was out on house calls all day. His wife said she'd notify him as soon as he returned, but she couldn't say when that would be. Camilla hoped the doctor would get here in time, but for now they were on their own.

Charlotte lay on the bed, her back propped up against several pillows and her face red. Lady Cheryl stood beside her, grasping her hand firmly, worry on her face. Mary scurried around plumping pillows, fetching water and generally doing everything she could to make Charlotte more comfortable. "Oh Camilla, thank heavens you're here," Lady Cheryl exclaimed.

Camilla's eyes widened as she caught Harry's surprised expression. Lady Cheryl had never before indicated that she even remembered Camilla's name, let alone been glad to see her. "Yes, I'm here. How are you feelin', Charlotte?" She hurried to Charlotte's side and kissed her damp forehead.

Charlotte smiled weakly at her and closed her eyes with a grimace as another contraction took hold. When it was over, she turned her head to look at Camilla. "I need you, Cammie. Harry's no help, Mother is babbling with worry, and Mary's never done this before and swears she'll faint. I need someone who will be calm and help me through this, because I don't think I can do it otherwise. It hurts so much."

"Well, my dear, I'm here. You can do this, I know you can. Just try to breathe deeply when the pain comes. Let's sit you up a bit straighter. In fact, if you think you're up to it, how about standing for a little while?"

Charlotte nodded, and Camilla helped her to her feet. "I don't think that's a good idea," fussed Lady Cheryl. "She should lay down."

"It's okay, Lady Cheryl. I helped Mam birth three of my brothers

and sisters, and walkin' sometimes helps with the pain."

Charlotte leaned heavily on Camilla's arm and walked slowly around the room. When the next contraction came, she stopped and cried out, leaning with her hands to her knees.

"Deep breaths, my dear," said Camilla evenly.

Charlotte slowed her breathing, her eyes never leaving Camilla's face. "Phew. That was much better, actually. I think I'll keep walking." She stood straight again and shuffled forward.

They continued that way for hours, until Charlotte couldn't stand any longer. She made her way to the bed and laid back on it with a cry. Mary helped her to get comfortable, her lips pulled tight. The contractions were so close together now, Camilla knew it wouldn't be long before the baby arrived.

But an hour later, she still couldn't see the baby's head, and she began to wonder if perhaps something had gone wrong. She hurried from the room, and found Harry seated in an armchair in the rapidly darkening living room, his head in his hands. He looked up as she ran toward him, his dark hair standing on end where his fingers had run through it. He jumped to his feet, his face clothed in panic. "What is it, Cammie? Is Charlotte okay?"

"I'm not sure, Harry. I think you should try to find the doctor again – I wonder why he hasn't gotten here yet. She's not progressin' and I don't know what to do about it."

Harry was already headed for the front door. He put his hat on, grabbed his coat, and was outside as soon as she'd finished speaking.

"Hurry!" she called after his departing figure, then rubbed her hand across her furrowed brow, took a deep breath, and scurried back to the bedroom. She found Charlotte much as she'd left her – prone on the bed, moaning, her knees bent and her face contorted with pain. "There there. I'm here, my dear. You're doing so well – just keep going. I know you're tired, but not long now."

She exchanged a worried glance with Charlotte's mother, who was pacing back and forth beside the bed, wringing her hands in front of her skirts. She had to get Lady Cheryl out of the room – her anxiety was affecting Charlotte, who needed to stay focused. "Lady Cheryl, do you think perhaps you could boil the kettle? We may need some hot water soon. And it would help to have some extra towels – these are soaked. I think there are clean ones on the line in the backyard."

Lady Cheryl left with a quick nod of her head.

What now? Mam had always popped her babies out with no trouble at all. She didn't know how to deal with one who refused to budge. She pressed her fingertips gently on Charlotte's abdomen, feeling for any movement or change. It seemed as though the baby was quite low, lower than it had been. Why wasn't she able to push it out?

Another contraction , and Charlotte pushed hard, finishing with a loud sob. Camilla looked for the baby's head again, and finally saw it – a patch of dark hair was showing through. She sighed with relief. "Charlotte my dear, I can see the baby's head. We're almost there. You can do this."

"No, I can't," puffed Charlotte, tears glimmering in her eyes. "Something's wrong. Why is it taking so long? I can't keep going, I just can't."

"Yes, you can. You're an amazin', strong, determined woman. You can do this. Now focus, and next time you feel a contraction, push as hard as you can." Camilla's heart raced and her head buzzed with adrenalin. What if it all went wrong? She was responsible for Charlotte and her baby. Where was that doctor? She glanced at the door, hoping to see him come walking in with his black bag beneath his arm, but there was no one there. If Charlotte died, she doubted Harry would ever forgive her. She knew she'd never forgive herself.

She drew a deep breath just as Charlotte started to push again. This time, the baby barely moved, and Camilla was sure Charlotte was quickly running out of energy. Her face was a dull gray, her eyes looked lifeless, and she panted heavily between contractions. "Almost there, dear. One more big push."

Charlotte closed her eyes and pushed again. This time, enough of the head and shoulders emerged that Camilla was able to reach beneath the baby's arms and pull it out in one swift movement. The baby lay limp in her hands, its face and lips blue and its eyes closed.

"Cammie, how's the baby? Where's my baby?" whispered Charlotte in exhaustion.

"She's fine, darlin'. A little girl, right here in my arms. I'm just goin' to clean her up a bit. You rest and I'll bring her to you shortly." She tied off the cord and clipped it, wrapped the baby in a towel and hurried to lay her on top of the dresser, out of Charlotte's line of sight.

Come on, little girl. Come on, my darlin' ...

But the baby lay still before her. Camilla's eyes filled with tears. *Oh God, please don't let her die. She's so perfect, so beautiful. It would destroy Charlotte and Harry. Please, help me God.* She lifted the towel away from the baby's chest, and listened to her heartbeat. It was there, she could hear it, but only just.

She opened the baby's mouth and saw it was full of mucus. *Aha!* With her fingers, she wiped it clear, then covered the baby's mouth with her own to push a deep breath into the baby's lungs, a technique she'd learned from the doctor in Greyburn when one of the children at school had been stung by a bee and swelled up until he stopped breathing.

There was a movement. Then the baby gasped, coughed, and finally let out a small cry. Camilla scooped her up to hold against her chest. "Good girl! What a good darlin' little girl you are!" The baby

continued to squall and mewl into her bodice as she carried her carefully to Charlotte, placing her in her mother's raised arms.

Just then, Lady Cheryl ran into the room, her arms full of towels, a jug of water in one hand. "Charlotte! Oh my, let me see." She placed the jug on the dresser, dropped the towels beside the bed and hurried with hands extended to see her granddaughter for the first time.

"It's a girl, Mother. A beautiful little girl."

Lady Cheryl knelt beside the bed, and stroked the back of the baby's head as she ceased crying and began to nurse vigorously. "A girl. Oh my dear, you did so well. Look at her – she's divine."

"I'm going to call her Anna Cheryl Beaufort Brown," said Charlotte, tenderly watching the baby feed.

Lady Cheryl clapped her hands to her mouth with a cry. "It's perfect," she said with tears in her eyes. Camilla felt her own eyes moisten at the sight of three generations of Beaufort women, all embracing in this special shared moment.

Harry rushed in with Dr. Potter close behind. The doctor pushed his spectacles up the bridge of his nose and swung his black bag onto the foot of the bed. "What do we have here?" he asked jovially. "A little girl, by the looks of it. Well done, Charlotte – she looks healthy and strong. Feeding already, eh? She'll do just fine. I'll have a look at her when she's done."

Harry hurried to Charlotte's side to meet his daughter, and Lady Cheryl stepped away to give the couple some space. "Edward is watching Johnny and is probably at his wit's end by now. I'd better go help him and tell him the good news." She smiled and marched from the room.

Camilla followed her with a sigh. She wandered outside to wash her hands and face at the water pump. A crescent moon glowed above the junipers, and banks of stars twinkled between voluminous clouds. She tipped her head to one side, then the other, stretching the tension from her sore neck muscles. *Thank you, God, she prayed. Things didn't look very good in there, and I had no idea what to do, but You helped me and now everything is simply wonderful. Thank You.*

She felt warm all over, tingling with joy and excitement. The stress of the labor peeled away as she gazed at the serene landscape. She heard the call of an owl flying by in search of prey, the soft nicker of a horse in the yard, the sudden clucking from hens Harry had bought and settled in a coop in the barn a few weeks earlier. All of it brought peace to her soul, and she smiled into the darkness, relishing the feeling that all was well in her world.

Chapter Sixteen

Clifford pulled his Stetson down to shade his eyes as he rode into Cheyenne. The fledgling town had grown quickly due to the arrival of the railroad four years earlier, and he eyed the busy street warily. Drunken cowboys burst out the door of a nearby saloon, followed by several railroad workers. A fistfight broke out, making Clifford's mare skitter sideways. "Whoa," he said, steering her away from the fracas.

Several saloon girls hung from the windows above the saloons to watch the fight, jeering and calling to the men below, their bosoms spilling over the top of their tightly-laced bodices. One with brightly-colored hair piled in messy curls on top of her head whistled at him and shook her chest provocatively with a laugh.

He lowered his eyebrows and looked away. This town was certainly nothing like Cutter's Creek – and not for the better.

It didn't take long to locate the sheriff's office, only a few doors down from the string of saloons and disorderly houses on the main street. He tied Tilly to the rail outside and sauntered in, removing his hat as his eyes adjusted to the dim light.

"Can I help you?" asked a man behind a simple desk, his feet propped on top of it. He watched Clifford beneath drooping eyelids, chewing a piece of straw.

"Howdy. I'm Sheriff Clifford Brentwood of Cutter's Creek, Montana Territory. Just stopping in to pick up an outlaw wanted in Bozeman – Pee-wee Hungerford. You got him?" Clifford flashed his sheriff's badge at the man.

He jumped to his feet and shot out a hand to shake Clifford's. "Yes, sir. Welcome, Sheriff – I'm Deputy Jim Miles. Good to see ya. We got 'im alright, just back here." He turned to pull a ring of keys from a nail in the wall behind the desk and beckoned Clifford to follow him to the jail in the rear of the building.

"Thank you kindly," said Clifford.

"Don't mention it. We're just glad ya offered to do it, since otherwise it'd be one of us goin' north. My missus is real close to poppin' out our first babe, so I didn't wanna leave her. I'm sure ya understand." He grinned and pointed to one of two cells. Both were occupied, but the one he indicated held a bull of a man, his neck almost nonexistent between muscular shoulders. His clothing was soiled with blood and his nose looked broken. His vacant eyes stared at them both with disdain. "There he is. Though I dare say ya'll wanna

get some rest 'fore ya set out again. Ya got somewhere to stay?"

"I was going to stay in a hotel, but ..."

"Nah, ya don't wanna do that. Why don't ya come home with me tonight? The missus won't mind, and she makes a mean stew."

"Thank you, I will. I wanted to talk to you and your boss about something as well, if you've got a few minutes to spare."

Jim wandered back to his desk, pulled a chair over for Clifford, sat down in his own and crossed his legs. "Well, the sheriff's out with most of the deputies, dealin' with some bounty hunters west of town. It's just me and two other deputies in town right now – one's sleepin' and the other's breakin' up a fight over at the Horse Shoe Saloon. So ya'll have to make do with me, I'm 'fraid."

Clifford sat and leaned forward with his hands on his knees. "No problem, I'm sure you'll be able to help me as well as anyone."

"Shoot," said Jim.

"I've been tracking an outlaw, Wild Clay Craddock, for nigh on a decade now. I've never come close to finding him. But I heard some weeks back that there was a sighting near here of some of his gang, including a man named Hairy. Craddock's supposed to be in New Mexico, but his gang could be anywhere. I'm just wondering if you've heard anything."

Jim frowned and rubbed his hand across his bearded chin. "Hmmm ... can't say as I have. There were a few no-good thieves lurkin' 'round town – that's who them bounty hunters are after. But I ain't heard nothin' 'bout 'em being part of Craddock's gang. Think they was from Nebraska, actually, out here rustlin' cattle and such."

Clifford sighed. "That's disappointing. But, I'm not giving up. Let me know if you find out anything, won't you?"

"Sure will," said Jim.

"Thank you, I appreciate it." Clifford leaned back in his chair and pressed his fingertips against his tired eyes. He'd been so anxious to get here and find out what they knew about the gang, he hadn't stopped to think that perhaps the rumor was wrong and it wasn't even Craddock's men robbing the local ranchers. He groaned inwardly over the disappointment. It seemed every time he thought he was inching closer to Craddock, the man disappeared into the ether like a ghost. Could it be that he'd never receive justice in this lifetime for what he did?

For the first time, he began to believe it was likely. He'd always been so sure in the past that one day he'd catch Craddock, but now doubt was seeping into his spirit. He might never find the brute, might never be able to give Marlene's family the peace and resolution they no doubt longed for. The thought made his stomach churn, and he forced down the bile that rose in his throat.

Clifford left Cheyenne the next day, anxious to discharge his duty in Bozeman and get back to Cutter's Creek. Pee-wee Hungerford rode ahead of him on a bay nag of a gelding whose head was already drooping low, even though they'd only been on the road a few hours. He hoped the animal would make it all the way to Bozeman. Pee-wee's wide shoulders sagged too, and he rocked from side to side with each step the horse took.

Tilly pranced and jogged, eager to stretch her legs, and he patted her neck. *Sorry, not today, girl. Today we have to plod, since I doubt this bay could gallop if he tried.*

He'd tried not to think about Camilla on the ride south and east, but now that he'd lost his lead on Craddock's fellow outlaws, he could think of nothing else. Why hadn't he said something to her when he'd had the chance? Now it was too late. She might well be engaged before he got home, and then he'd have to live with the outcome of his silence the rest of his life.

That is, if he stayed in town – he still wasn't resolved on it yet. If he did, he'd have to see her and her family at church, Bible studies, dances, picnics ... every community event for the foreseeable future. If he moved on, though, he'd be leaving behind his entire life – not that it amounted to much when he thought about it, but it was all he had.

He sighed and tipped his hat back on his head with one finger. He'd been thinking a lot lately about his life, and what he was doing with it.

What was he doing with it? He had friends – everyone in town, really – but none of them were close. He'd never allowed himself to get too close to anyone. He spent so much of his time working, which in Cutter's Creek was a solitary affair – there wasn't enough crime to rate a deputy. Almost every other man in town his age was married; most had brought their wives west with them. They were busy with their families, and most of the unmarried females were still young girls attending school.

Clifford's thoughts returned to Camilla Brown, wondering what she was doing, what she thought of him – if she thought of him at all. Was she engaged yet? Was she happy? Of course she was happy. He remembered her laugh in the still night when he'd caught sight of them from his porch, returning from their Bible study group to the Todds'. She had the look of a woman in love, not that he knew much about that.

Every fiber of his being tensed at the thought of never kissing her lips again, never holding her in his arms. Their kiss had taken his

breath away. Her scent, the soft feel of her lips beneath his, the heaving of her chest as she gasped for breath once they parted ... he couldn't wipe the memories from his thoughts. They lingered there, torturing him.

He stood in his stirrups to stretch his legs, and pushed thoughts of Camilla Brown aside. What he really needed was a break – the slow pace was getting to him. Pee-wee hadn't uttered a word to him since they left, and had only grunted in response to his questions before that. He was no conversationalist, that was for certain.

He frowned and pulled Tilly to a halt. "Pull up, Pee-wee. Time for a rest. Let's dismount here and have a bite to eat."

Pee-wee wordlessly halted his mount and slipped gracefully to the ground. Clifford was impressed – he moved well for such a large man. The outlaw sauntered to where Clifford stood, flopped down on the ground with a huff and crossed his long legs in front of him, not making eye contact.

Clifford raised an eyebrow – he was surprisingly flexible as well, it seemed. He stepped away, watching Pee-wee closely, and turned quickly to relieve himself in the undergrowth beside the trail. He watched a meadowlark scamper from the brush to disappear, its feathered head bobbing, behind a bunch of sapling fir trees farther away from him. Its fluting call trailed behind it. He smiled, and his stomach growled. He was famished, but there wasn't much for lunch today – just some salt pork and hard biscuits he'd shoved into his saddle bags before they left Cheyenne.

He heard the snap of a twig behind him, and turned – too late. The thump of a heavy stick against his temple was the last thing he was aware of before darkness overtook him.

Chapter Seventeen

Camilla slapped Johnny and Anna's soiled diapers against a large rock in the creek bed, then lathered them with more soap before dipping them in the water to rinse. She lifted her head to gaze up the hill to where the split-log house sat, smoke curling from the chimney. The sun had almost dipped beyond the Bighorn Range behind her, causing long, dark shadows to creep up the valley, bringing the chill wind with them.

She shivered. Fall was almost over – soon it would be Thanksgiving, her third in Cutter's Creek. She thought back to their arrival, and as always her mind drifted to her friend Maria Holloway. A heaviness settled over her heart. She wondered where Maria was at that moment, if she was even still alive.

She'd spent most of the past week at Charlotte and Harry's, helping take care of Johnny and Anna, and she was exhausted. At least they had Mary's help. That woman was a godsend – she cooked, tidied, and made Camilla wish she'd had someone like her back home all those years. But Mary had gone to town for supplies, which left Camilla to take care of everyone this evening. She straightened her tired back, stretched out the kinks, and pressed her fists into it, then lifted her hands above her head and yawned.

She hadn't seen Winston in a few days, other than to say hello. He'd called in at the ranch a couple of times over the course of the week, but she'd been too busy settling Johnny or cooking meals to spend time with him, and he'd looked most disappointed. Even though she enjoyed his company, she wasn't as sad as he was about their time apart. It gave her an opportunity to think about what she wanted with a clear head.

There was no question that he was attractive, strong and masculine – qualities she found hard to resist when he was close by. But was that enough? Lately, she wondered if they had anything more in common than mutual attraction and availability. He was shy and quiet, so it was difficult to get to know him quickly. Perhaps she just needed more time to draw him out of his shell. What she had seen of his personality in recent weeks, though, made her think that perhaps he wasn't lively enough for her tastes. She was used to Harry, who always made things interesting.

She shook her head and laughed. A little too interesting, most of the time. Winston would probably never get them chased down by gun-

wielding thugs on a crowded city street ... but that was a good thing, wasn't it? Surely she didn't need that kind of excitement in her life, the kind that used to follow her brother wherever he went. She could settle for stable, reliable and polite. It would certainly make for a nice change to be with a man who was nothing like her trouble-making brother or drunken father.

That was probably it – she was too used to having men in her life who raised Cain, who were unreliable and unpredictable. But that wasn't what she wanted. She wanted a man who was warm, caring, loving, dependable and secure. And Winston was all of those. He was perfect for her.

An image of Sheriff Brentwood flashed through her mind, and she felt her cheeks flush with warmth. He wasn't even here, and the thought of him sent tremors through her entire body. But she knew so little about him, and he'd never shown more than a passing interest in her until recently. Even now, all they'd shared was a moment at the picnic by the river, and their kiss. If he wanted to court her, he would have done so. Wouldn't he? It's not like she could pursue him. If he wasn't interested, she'd have to let it be.

Maybe that was why she couldn't get him out of her mind. He was unattainable and disinterested, and Winston was the opposite. Winston wanted her. But she wanted Clifford – his blond hair and ice-blue eyes, his muscular arms and tanned skin, the serious expression that rarely left his face, the quiet confidence of his voice. That kiss they'd shared – she remembered the feel of his strong arms encircling her waist, and it made her knees weak.

She waded to the edge of the creek bed and sat on an exposed rock. She lifted her fingers and traced the curve of her lips, recalling with a smile the feel of his pressed there ...

No, she told herself – she didn't want him. She wanted Winston. Winston would make a good husband, and he cared for her. There was no point in silly fantasies about a man she barely knew, who didn't care enough about her to call on her even though they'd shared a passionate kiss. She wouldn't let that moment derail what would be a good match for her.

Camilla shook her head. She would forget about Clifford Brentwood and focus on what was real, good and true. Winston was the man for her, and it was time she concentrated on him and him alone. She gathered the clean laundry into her basket and lifted it up to set against her left hip.

As she climbed the hill, she thought about what she'd heard earlier that day from Mrs. Waverley in the mercantile. Mrs. Waverley was talking to Abigail as she stood behind the counter laying out bolts of fabric for her to inspect. She'd said something about Sheriff

Brentwood leaving the town vulnerable – exposed to the criminal element.

When she'd asked Mrs. Waverley what on Earth she meant, the older woman replied that the sheriff was out of town for at least two weeks, transporting an outlaw from Cheyenne to Bozeman. "Irresponsible, it is, if'n ya ask me," she'd sniffed, "since we got no other law enforcement in Cutter's Creek. I'm tellin' ya, he should've thought of that 'fore he went off on some wild errand that's like to get him killed."

Camilla trembled remembering Mrs. Waverley's words. She tried not to think about how often his work must place him in danger. It sounded as though he'd volunteered for the job, though she couldn't understand why. Cutter's Creek was usually such a safe, quiet town – wouldn't he want to stay and enjoy that? Did he really need to seek out excitement and danger elsewhere?

She pulled the back door of the house open and walked into the kitchen. She'd have to hang the laundry by the fire to dry, since darkness had already fallen and Charlotte would need these linens dry for the baby in the morning. It was hard work trying to keep up with all the washing now that there were two young ones to tend to.

Lady Cheryl and Lord Edward sat by the roaring fire in the living room, him reading the newspaper Harry had purchased in town that morning and she working on her needlepoint. She'd donned a pair of spectacles for the work, and peered over the top of them at Camilla as she entered the room, the laundry basket still on her hip. "There you are, Camilla – Charlotte was asking for you. What have you there?"

"Just a few of the baby's things to dry by the fire," she said with a smile, kneeling beside the hearth. "I washed them in the creek, so they're good as new."

"Must you lay them about so in here? Rather unseemly, don't you think?"

Camilla's eyes widened, "Oh dear, I'm sorry. Would you rather I hung them elsewhere? Only they may not dry in time. The baby's goin' through them rather quickly, I'm afraid."

Lady Cheryl waved her hand at Camilla and resumed her needlepoint. "No, no, never mind. We're to live like savages, I suppose, but it can't be helped. I wonder what we should do about supper."

Camilla's smile was tight. "I'm startin' on that next. I thought we might have a meat pie with mashed potatoes."

"Oh, that sounds lovely."

Camilla waited for Lady Cheryl to offer to help, then returned to laying out the laundry when she didn't. She shouldn't have been surprised – Lady Cheryl hadn't helped with much of anything since

her arrival, other than to cuddle the baby or play with Johnny. She knew Her Ladyship had probably never done a day's work in her life, and she was Harry and Charlotte's guest. But the fact that she didn't even offer still irked her.

She finished with the wash, and pushed herself to her feet with a groan. It seemed the work never ended. How she wished she could sit before a warm fire and knit. She loved to knit – it was relaxing, and she longed to make Johnny and Anna mittens with winter fast approaching. Maybe she could start on that tonight after supper ...

She carried the laundry basket into the outdoors pantry to gather the ingredients she'd need for supper, then set the basket down and carried the food carefully in her apron back into the house. Potatoes were plentiful at this time of year and always went well with meat pie. Harry had received some beef from a nearby rancher in exchange for a day's work on his ranch. It was a special treat, meant to bolster Charlotte's spirits and in celebration of baby Anna's arrival.

She smiled as she sliced the beef into small pieces. Regardless of her internal complaints about the workload, she wouldn't change a thing. She loved her family and the warm, happy home Harry and Charlotte had built together. If she could help them in some small way, she was happy to do it. If only Lady Cheryl felt the same way.

Suddenly she had a thought, and her eyes narrowed as she smiled. "Lady Cheryl, I wonder if perhaps you could help me?" she called.

She heard movement in the living room, and Lady Cheryl's face soon appeared in the doorway. "Yes, my dear?"

"I'm about to start on the pie crust, and wondered if you have any experience makin' pastry?"

"I have."

Camilla started peeling a large white potato. "Do you mind helpin'?"

"I ... suppose I could, if you like." Lady Cheryl was obviously uncomfortable with the idea.

"That'd be wonderful – thank you."

Lady Cheryl inched toward the kitchen table, where Camilla had placed a large bowl and the ingredients for the pie. After some hesitation, she reached for an apron hung on a peg at the end of the table. As she wrapped it around her waist, Camilla noticed for the first time how thin she was. She looked paler than usual, too, and her collarbone was protruding in an unusual way.

Lady Cheryl smiled at her, poured flour into the bowl, and let the bag fall back to the table with a crash, causing Camilla to cry out in surprise. And then she did so again as Lady Cheryl's legs gave way beneath her and she flopped to the floor, sending the bowl and flour flying.

“Help!” Camilla screamed, dashing to Lady Cheryl’s side. “Someone help!”

Chapter Eighteen

The trill of a meadowlark crept across Clifford's consciousness. Then the rush of pain in his head overwhelmed his thoughts, and his eyes blinked open. He groaned and rolled onto his back to stare at the darkening sky above him. The first stars twinkled faintly in the expanse, and he pushed himself into a sitting position. What had happened? The last thing he remembered was riding with Pee-wee across the plain, then stopping for lunch ...

... dagnabit. The outlaw must have jumped him!

He spotted Tilly grazing in the distance, her bit jangling in her mouth. The bay nag was nowhere in sight. He sighed with relief – at least Pee-wee hadn't taken Tilly. He'd have been in big trouble out here without her.

He wondered for a moment why anyone with an ounce of intelligence would leave the Arabian behind. Well, he wasn't sure Pee-wee had an ounce of intelligence, but the more likely explanation was that Tilly must have been unfriendly. He'd seen someone else try to ride her once before, and they'd ended up sailing over her head and breaking their arm on a fence paling after she'd kicked up her heels in disgust.

He smiled and ran his hand over the back of his head, finding a swollen knot beneath his hair. He winced as his fingers pressed the lump, covered with blood-matted hair. He reached for his hat on the ground beside him and dusted it off before placing it carefully back on his head.

He whistled, and Tilly raised her head with a snort. Her intelligent eyes found him and she let out a low whinny before high-stepping over to greet him, her neck arched and her nostrils flared. "Good girl, come here." He stood slowly and stroked her nose.

As he tried to mount her, the world spun and blackness flooded his vision for several seconds. He leaned against her shoulder, then pushed his foot into the stirrup again and eased himself up onto her back. He had to find Pee-wee and re-arrest him – who knows where the man had gone or how far he'd ridden by now? He was Clifford's responsibility, and if he hurt anyone else it would be on Clifford's conscience.

Laying his hand on his holster, he realized with dismay that his revolver was gone. A quick glance down revealed the rifle had been taken from his saddlebag, as well as his large canteen and the

remaining food, leaving him only the small canteen. He frowned. He'd have to scavenge for food and water along the way, but it wasn't the first time and no doubt wouldn't be the last. The guns were the greater loss.

He clucked his tongue and Tilly started forward. After a quick drink of water from the remaining canteen, he strained his eyes in the dull light of dusk, looking for a sign to indicate which direction the outlaw had headed. He circled the clearing and found a single line of hoofprints leading north, toward Montana Territory. At least he wouldn't have to backtrack.

He pressed his heels to Tilly's sides, and she leaped forward in pursuit of the escapee.

Charlotte pressed the damp washcloth to her mother's forehead and felt the grip of grief tighten across her chest. Lady Cheryl's face was gray and her cheeks had hollowed in the last few days. She knew it wouldn't be long before her mother was taken from her. Her only comfort lay in the knowledge that she'd be free from pain and with her heavenly Father, but she still couldn't shake the horrible feeling of regret over time lost together.

"Charlotte my dear ..." Lady Cheryl's eyes opened, and she smiled weakly.

"Yes, Mother, I'm here. What is it?"

"I want to tell you something."

"Yes?" She leaned forward to tenderly stroke her mother's hair back from her forehead.

"You must know ... I'm so proud of you my darling."

Charlotte felt the lump in her throat shift, and a sob rose to the surface. She covered her mouth with her free hand and closed her eyes against the threat of tears. She had to be strong for her mother's sake. "How could you be? I've never been what you wanted. I've always been so headstrong, conceited, selfish and rebellious. I'm so sorry, Mother – please forgive me. If only I could go back in time ..."

"No, no, my darling, don't worry yourself. Now that you're a mother, surely you can see none of that matters in the end. A mother loves her child no matter what. And being stubborn and headstrong are not things to be ashamed of, my dear. I'm simply sorry I pushed you so hard, and didn't show you over the years how much I admired the woman you were growing into. You remind me of myself at your age. Only I didn't take the chances you did, and I lived with that regret for many years."

Tears rolled down Charlotte's pale cheeks and she rested her head

on her mother's thin chest. "Oh Mother, I love you too. But what do you mean, 'regret'?"

Lady Cheryl reached up to caress Charlotte's cheek. "When I was young as you are, I longed for adventure and love. I was matched by my parents with your father, though I was painfully in love with a young doctor in London. It was a great scandal at the time. Your father knew about him, but still agreed to marry me."

"What?" Charlotte lifted her head with a jerk and stared into her mother's dark eyes.

"I know. It's shocking to imagine your mother in love."

"No – I just never imagined you'd cause a scandal. And Father ... you didn't love him? It was all a lie?" Charlotte's heart beat wildly in her throat. She felt as though her whole world was crashing down around her. Mother hadn't married Father for love? All this time, she just assumed her parents loved each other. Her entire childhood had been built around that foundation. And now it was being stripped away in front of her.

"I didn't love him at first. I was too angry – with my parents, with him. And with the man I loved. Herbert ... he gave me up for a thousand pounds. That's what my father paid him, and I never heard from him again. Oh, I checked on him years later through a friend of mine, and he was married to another woman – they had a family and seemed quite happy. But I was devastated - he broke my heart, and I married your father with only broken pieces of it left.

"But over time your father loved me and gradually helped my heart mend, until one day I awoke to the knowledge that I loved him. It wasn't a passionate kind of love, certainly not love at first sight, but a gradual building, of friendship first. So no, it wasn't a lie. By the time you came along, things had changed. And I love him still."

"Oh," Charlotte sighed in relief.

"I used to think Herbert was the great love of my life, the love that I lost. Now I know the truth – my greatest love has been your father. He has been my comfort, my partner, my true companion. I couldn't have asked for anyone better to spend my life with. But I do still regret some of the chances I never took in my youth. If I could have my time again, I'd take them, have all the adventures I longed for. I'd be more like you."

Charlotte's head returned to her mother's chest. "Why are you telling me all this?"

"Because I want you to know I understand you, and the choices you've made. I could easily have made them myself many years ago. When your father and I spoke to the Duke of Notherington about an engagement, we did it because we didn't want you to find yourself in the same heartbreaking situation I did so long ago. We wanted you to

marry someone we believed could be your life companion, but who wouldn't hurt you as Herbert did me. We wanted the best for you."

Lady Cheryl sighed before continuing. "When you ran away, and when we heard of your marriage to Harry, we thought our worst nightmare had become a reality. But after spending time here with you, I feel comforted by the knowledge that you made the right choice. All we wanted for you is your happiness. We were upset that you felt you had to leave your home behind to find it, but now I see that I can leave this world knowing you'll be well taken care of."

Johnny toddled into the bedroom and over to Charlotte. He threw his chubby little arms around her legs, hugging tightly to her skirts and burying his face in the thick layers of fabric.

She lowered a hand and stroked his hair, feeling as though her heart would burst. All this time she'd believed she was such a disappointment to her parents, especially her mother. To learn that Mother was proud of her, loved her and understood the choices she'd made filled her with poignant joy. A heavy weight lifted from her chest and drifted away as tears fell onto the blanket beneath her cheek.

Trees crowded the trail, heavy branches scratching at Clifford's face and arms as Tilly wove her way through the woods. Up ahead he saw a patch of light – a clearing. He leaned over the horse's neck to duck beneath another low-hanging branch, and they emerged into daylight.

He blinked rapidly, his eyes adjusting to the brightness. In the distance, on the other side of the clearing, he saw Pee-wee, his sloping shoulders towering over the back of the plodding old nag. He disappeared into the woods without a backward glance.

Clifford smiled. He'd been tracking the outlaw for two days and had finally caught up. They were traversing the foothills of the Bighorns, and no doubt Pee-wee thought he'd lost the sheriff in the thick woods, but years of practice had given him a keen eye for each broken twig or indentation in the dry earth, leading the way to his quarry.

He pressed Tilly forward and she galloped across the clearing, slowing again as she entered the woods. Thankfully Pee-wee hadn't taken the hunting knife that he kept strapped in a sheath around his ankle, or the pistol he always tucked into the back of his belt. He pulled out that pistol now, cocking the hammer with his thumb as Tilly wound her way through the towering junipers and spruce trees. The trail they followed was narrow and dark, hidden from the searching light of day by the trees towering above.

He pulled Tilly to a halt and listened. Pee-wee wasn't far ahead now

– he could hear the bay nag meandering noisily through the dry leaf litter lining the dank ground. He urged the mare forward, caught up within a minute and raised his pistol, pointing it at the small head sitting on those wide, sloping shoulders. “Stop right there!”

Pee-wee pulled the horse to a stop, and sat still, not looking back.

“I have a gun, Pee-wee, and I’ll use it if you move even an inch.” Clifford rode up beside the man, pulling a pair of handcuffs from his holster.

Pee-wee reached for the revolver wedged into the front of his pants, but his tiny brain and enormous stomach slowed him down. Clifford had ample time to press the end of the pistol against the outlaw’s temple. “I’ll have that, thank you,” he snarled.

Realizing his position, Pee-wee grunted and handed the sheriff the revolver.

Clifford took it, slipped the cuffs over the outlaw’s wrists, then extracted his rifle from his captive’s saddlebag, returning it to its proper place in the saddle scabbard beside his own leg. “Let’s go. We’ll have to double back a little to find the trail to Bozeman, but it shouldn’t take long. And don’t try anything like this again, or I’ll save time and just shoot you.”

Pee-wee finally turned and fixed his small, beady eyes on Clifford’s. “Yer the boss, I guess,” he hissed.

“And I hope you haven’t eaten all the food. It’s a long way to Bozeman, and you’ll be mighty hungry.”

Pee-wee grunted again in response and looked away.

Clifford sighed as they set off back the way they’d come moments earlier. This job was fast becoming more trouble than it was worth. His head still throbbed from where Pee-wee had struck it. He was just glad the lout hadn’t thought to shoot him, and didn’t figure he would be so lucky twice. Dumb as Pee-wee was, he’d be keeping a close eye on him from here on out.

The whole time he’d tracked Pee-wee, he was thinking about home – about Camilla Brown. He could have died on the trail from Cheyenne. He’d been unfocused and reckless, turning his back on a known cattle rustler and murderer. If he had, would she have mourned him? Would she have thought of him?

Suddenly he knew what he had to do. Whether she was going to marry Winston or not, he had to tell her how he felt. She might turn him down ... almost certainly would, in his mind. But no matter, he had to get it off his chest. He couldn’t die knowing he hadn’t been honest with her.

The sun was setting with a brilliant burst of pink and orange over the peaks behind them as they trotted back through the clearing. Clifford shivered and pulled the collar of his coat up higher around his

neck. They'd had snow flurries over the past few nights on the trail, and he was anxious to finish this job and hand Pee-wee over to the sheriff in Bozeman so he could get back to Cutter's Creek. It would be Thanksgiving in a few weeks, and he wanted to be home before the heavy snowfall began and Montana Territory was socked into a deep freeze for months.

More importantly, he had to see Camilla before she married Winston. Provided she hadn't already – when he'd left Cutter's Creek they weren't even engaged, but that was weeks ago.

Not for the first time, he wished he'd never signed up for this hare-brained job. Sure, the pay was good, he'd had time to think — as he'd desired — and his brush with death had helped him see what really mattered. But it kept him away from home for too long.

When all was stripped away, what mattered were the folks he cared about and who cared for him. He knew now that he wanted to get to know this God who kept saving him from disaster better. And he wanted Camilla. Those were the things that were clear when he'd woken with a throbbing head, no food and few weapons, alone in the middle of the frigid wilderness. Those were the things he was going to pursue, no matter who or what stood in the way.

Chapter Nineteen

Camilla's eyes rested on the peaceful face of Anna sleeping in her cradle. Her chubby cheeks were tinged with red from the cold, dry air, and black lashes nestled against their rosy roundness. She shifted her gaze to the bed in the center of the room, where Charlotte lay fully clothed with one arm wrapped around a sleeping Johnny, her eyes shut, a light snore emanating from her open mouth.

Camilla smiled. Poor Charlotte looked exhausted. Between the toddler, the baby and the sick mother, she wasn't getting much rest these days even with Mary and Camilla's help.

She shut the door quietly and tiptoed down the hall. It was Thanksgiving, and she had a lot of work still to do. She hurried back to the kitchen to continue preparing for the feast they'd share later that day. The mood in the snug house was subdued, given the state of Lady Cheryl's health. But Her Ladyship was adamant they celebrate the American ritual as usual – she wanted the chance to share one holiday with her grandchildren – and so they'd all decided to make the best of it given the circumstances. They would celebrate with cheer, forced though it might be, and shower Lady Cheryl with as much love, warmth and joy as they could muster.

She donned a floral print apron and smiled at Mary, who was kneading dough at the kitchen table. She pushed a strand of hair from her eyes with one hand and sighed. Winston would be here soon – she'd invited him to spend Thanksgiving with them, and he was bringing Justin since the two of them had no one else to celebrate with. They had left their family behind in Virginia. Sam and Estelle would be coming as well, bringing Margaret Hutchins, a young teacher from town, with them. The house would be full and cozy in no time. And she was looking forward to it.

She picked up a large wooden spoon from the kitchen table and walked to the blackened stove.

There was nothing quite as satisfying as a family coming together to share a meal, celebrate a holiday together and remember all they were thankful for. She had so much to be grateful for in her life – God had truly blessed her. It wasn't so long ago she'd been suffering the drudgery of taking care of her brothers and sisters in a cold dark shack in England, watching her mother suffer and her father drink his life away, with no real life of her own to speak of.

And now here she was, half a world away in Montana Territory, in

her brother's snug home, surrounded by loved ones, preparing a meal to share with her ... hmmm. What should she call Winston? Her beau? Her future fiancé?

A wrinkle formed between her eyes as she frowned in concentration, the spoon held high in her hand. She was fairly certain he was going to propose soon – he'd been dropping hints for almost a month now. But what would she say if he did? Was she ready to commit her life to him, to agree to spend the rest of her days with him as his wife?

She did care for him. He was handsome, kind, warm and sweet. He loved God, and helped people when they needed it. He'd make a good husband and father. Yes, if he asked her, she should agree to marry him. Shouldn't she? She couldn't keep going over this same question again and again in her mind – she had to make a decision. What was she waiting for ...

... or whom?

A bead of sweat broke out across her forehead, and she lifted her apron to wipe the dampness away. She couldn't help wondering what Clifford Brentwood was doing for the holidays. She hadn't seen him in weeks. Perhaps he was still on that job down in Wyoming Territory that Mrs. Waverley had told her about. She hoped not – the weather had turned cold, and there had been several light snow falls of late. They were expecting a heavy fall any time now.

She walked to the kitchen window and peered out through the curtains at the sky. It was clear, with only a few fluffy white clouds floating lazily overhead. No sign of snow, thank heavens. She'd ask Harry when he came in if he'd seen Clifford. She couldn't shake the thought that he might be in trouble, and the idea made her heart tremble in her chest. She turned back to the stove and stirred the large pot of sweet potatoes, her mind still troubled over Clifford's whereabouts.

The sound of hooves on the drive leading up to the house startled her. She laid the spoon back down, wiped her hands on the apron, untied it and hung it on the peg beside the kitchen door. She strode into the living room in time to see Harry helping Estelle from the wagon through the front window. Sam and Margaret stood beside her, and their cheerful voices floated into the house, warming the air around her.

She smiled and hurried to greet them. "Welcome!" she cried as she flung the front door open. She was met with a blast of cold air and shivered, running her hands up and down her arms. "Brrr ... come on inside! We're so glad you could join us today."

Sam stepped forward to pull her into a hearty embrace that knocked the air from her lungs, while Estelle turned to lift a covered bowl from

the back of the wagon. She handed it to Harry and smiled at Camilla as she reached for another. "My dear Cammie, how lovely you look! I've brought a contribution, just a small one. I hope you don't mind."

Camilla embraced first Margaret and then Estelle, kissing her weathered cheek. "Oh, wonderful! I was beginnin' to despair that I'd never get the meal prepared in time. Between takin' care of the children and Lady Cheryl, Charlotte, Mary and I have been run off our feet. Thank you so very much!"

"Don't mention it, my dear – I'm happy to help. We have snowflake potatoes, baked carrots and cornbread dressing." She passed a warm bowl to Camilla, carrying the last one herself as they all hurried into the house. Harry stayed behind to tend to the horse and wagon, and by the time Camilla had helped Estelle and Margaret with their coats, Sam was already stoking the fire in the hearth.

Camilla was about to take the women through to the kitchen when she heard more galloping horses approach the house. She hastened to the window and saw Winston with his brother Justin. Both were headed straight toward the barn to stable their horses.

She felt her heart seize in her chest. But what was she so anxious about? It was just Winston. She'd seen him almost every day this week. Still, she knew she'd have to make a decision soon, and the thought sent a pang of panic through her. Shouldn't she feel thrilled or excited in anticipation of an engagement? What was wrong with her?

She drew a deep breath and hustled to the kitchen to lay the bowl on the counter. "Mary, will you take care of everyone for a moment, please? We have more guests arriving."

Mary nodded and set about pouring the visitors coffee.

Camilla strode back to the front door again to greet the men, who by now were wiping their booted feet on the mat. She threw the door open and beamed at them both, her hands clasped together in front of her chest to keep them from shaking. "Winston, Justin – it's so good to see you both. Won't you come in?"

The cold water of the creek bubbled and chattered over protruding rocks, scaling a rotting log and falling to froth against the obstacle on the other side. On the bank, Clifford slid from Tilly's back and patted her neck with a sigh. "Almost home, girl. Almost home."

She bent her head and slurped at the water, her reins dangling on the ground in front of her.

He squatted beside the stream and lifted a handful of the cool, clear water to his mouth, sucking it in with gusto. It was delicious, and the excitement of finally bringing this journey to a close grew as the water

ran down his throat. He'd finally managed to get Pee-wee safely to Bozeman. The sheriff there was pleased to see them and had promised Pee-wee a fair trial the following week. Pee-wee hadn't looked convinced, insisting in a last minute appeal to Clifford that he was innocent of the murder – his only crime had been to take a few skinny heifers in Wyoming Territory he didn't think anyone would miss anyhow.

Clifford shook his head. In the end, he'd felt sad as he walked away from Pee-wee, who'd collapsed into the cell overcome with the knowledge that his life was no doubt close to its pitiful end. That was the last time he'd volunteer for prisoner transport duty – he didn't have the stomach for it anymore. Not to mention being away from home for so long.

Since when did I become such a tender-hearted homebody? I used to love the open road, camping out for weeks at a time, no one to answer to, nowhere to be. Just me, my horse and the trail beneath us.

He splashed water onto his face and scrubbed it vigorously with both hands. The cold of it sent a shock through his body, and he glanced skyward. It didn't look as though snow was coming, but there was a feeling in the air he recognized well – it wouldn't be long.

Calculating in his head, he considered what day it was. Thanksgiving? Was it Thanksgiving already? His heart sank. He'd hoped to get home before the holidays so he could talk to Camilla about his feelings for her. Ideally, he'd wanted to celebrate the holiday with her. He pictured her, snuggled up to a warm fire, a cup of apple cider in her hand, a smile on her pretty face, and he suddenly felt very much alone.

The beauty of the rugged landscape became barren, the freedom of life on the trail turned lonely, and the pleasure of completing a job prompted only hollow emptiness within. What did any of it matter if he was to spend the holidays alone while Camilla was likely enjoying Winston's company in his cozy ranch house? They might even be already engaged, planning their wedding while she sewed items for her trousseau.

He frowned and jumped to his feet, reaching for Tilly's reins. He had to get moving if he was going to beat the coming snow. And he needed to see Camilla before she committed her life to another man. Knowing her character, if she made the commitment, she'd see it through whether she wanted to or not. He had to get back to Cutter's Creek as quickly as possible.

God, please don't let her get engaged before I can speak with her. I can't pray that she'll marry me, because I know it's a long shot and I only want her to be happy, but if You could just make sure she isn't engaged until I've had my say, I'd really appreciate it.

He climbed onto Tilly's back, adjusted his Stetson and leaned over

the mare's neck. "Hiya!" he cried, and she sprang forward into the creek, the spray wetting them both as she pushed through the crystal-clear waters and over the sandy, pebbled creek bottom.

His heart pounded in his chest. He could see in the distance the valley where Cutter's Creek sat, nestled against the foothills of the Bighorn Range. It wouldn't be long and he'd be home. But then what? Should he try to find her immediately? That probably wasn't a good idea, since she'd no doubt be sharing the celebration with family and friends. Maybe he should wait until tomorrow?

He groaned inwardly. No, he couldn't wait. He'd been pondering this for weeks, wondering what he'd say to her, how she'd react, how it would feel to hold her in his arms and kiss her soft lips again. He couldn't wait one more day. As soon as he reached town, he'd set out in search of her. Surely she'd be either at the Todds', Harry and Charlotte's, or Winston and Justin's. He'd start with Harry and Charlotte's place, since that was on this side of town and he wouldn't have to double back.

Filled with resolve, he leaned into the frigid wind that buffeted them, whistling down the nearby slopes and plowing through the valley. He lifted his neckerchief to shield his bearded face from the wind's cutting breath. He'd see her soon, and he knew exactly what he'd say when he did. The rest would be up to her ... and God.

Chapter Twenty

Camilla lifted the napkin from her lap to dab the corners of her mouth and beamed at her family and friends seated around the long, split hardwood table. They'd finally finished eating their meal, and she had just served everyone a steaming cup of coffee.

A fire crackled and spat in the hearth. Across from her, Winston and Justin discussed the latest advancements in pig farming, and Harry listened intently, nodding and interjecting ideas of his own from time to time. Charlotte, Mary and Margaret chattered on either side of her about the latest fashions in Chicago, from where Margaret had just traveled.

Johnny toddled around the living room giggling and gabbling in his cute, babyish voice. Anna slept peacefully in her cradle, which Harry had carried out to be near to them while they ate. Lady Cheryl lay on the love seat, with Lord Edward beside her carefully spooning soup into her mouth, smiling as they spoke quietly together.

It was a warm and cozy scene, and Camilla soaked it all in with a smile of deep satisfaction. She took a moment to thank God for all of it, feeling as though she could hardly ask for anything more. But even as that thought crossed her mind, it was chased by the image of Clifford leaning in to kiss her, her back pressed up against the fence rail. Her cheeks flushed with warmth and she lifted a hand to brush the tips of her fingers over her lips.

Winston caught her eye and smiled with a dip of his head. She returned the smile, her cheeks burning, and took a sip of hot, black coffee.

"Cammie, would you care to take a walk with me?" he asked across the table. Charlotte glanced at her with raised eyebrows, a grin playing at the corners of her mouth.

Camilla felt her heart skip a beat. "It is rather cold, don't you think?"

"Just a short walk. We'll get our coats."

"All right then, I think that would be lovely." She stood and walked with Winston to the front door. They each donned coats and hats, and Camilla pulled a scarf from the coat rack to wrap around her neck. Her gloves were in her coat pockets, and she pulled them on as well as they walked out the front door into the cold afternoon air. She shivered and rubbed her hands together.

"Won't be long before the real snow comes," said Winston, offering

her his arm.

She linked her arm through his and they set off down the winding drive. “Indeed. I do believe I’m lookin’ forward to it this year. These past few winters were quite a shock – havin’ lived all my life in England, I thought I knew what snow, ice and cold were. Then I spent my first winter here – phew! I’ve never seen so much snow before.”

They walked longer than they’d planned to — for an hour or so — chatting about the weather and the latest news from town, how the shoats had grown and what Winston’s plans were for his ranch in the coming year. The sun dipped below the horizon, and shadows lengthened along the valley.

After a few minutes of silence, Winston spoke hesitantly. “Are you glad you traveled west after all?” He arched an eyebrow and waited for her reply with concern on his handsome face.

“Yes, I am. I can’t quite believe it, actually. I never intended to leave home that way – it was all Harry’s idea. I’d never have traveled across the Atlantic if he hadn’t. But now I’m glad I did. Of course I miss home, but I’ve had so many adventures, and learned so much about myself and God and life. I wouldn’t swap it for anythin’. I just wish I could share it with Mam and the wee ones.”

She dropped her gaze to the uneven ground, feeling the pang of homesickness shoot through her. She’d never realized how much she’d miss her brothers and sisters. She’d always thought of them as something of an inconvenience before – creatures that simply caused her extra work and ate all the food, leaving her stomach grumbling in complaint. But now that she’d been away from them four long years, she longed to see them again and hold them in her arms, sing them lullabies and read to them from the old, torn Bible that sat on Mam’s bedside table.

A tear drifted from the corner of her eye and wound its way down her cheek. She dabbed it away with her glove in surprise. She hadn’t realized how deeply she felt the loss until that moment.

“Do you think you’ll want to go back, then?” asked Winston, looking up at the horizon with a clenched jaw.

“I don’t know.”

He stopped, pulling her up short beside him. Turning to face her, he cupped her cheek with one icy hand. “Cammie darling, you know how I feel about you. Don’t you?”

She nodded, swallowing a lump in her throat, her heart beginning to pound in her chest.

“I care about you, and I think we’d make a good team, you and I. Will you consider marrying me?”

Her eyes widened and she stifled a gasp. This was how he asked her? Where was the spark, the romance? He cared for her – but did he

love her the way she wanted to be loved? She couldn't tell, his face was unreadable in the failing light. "I ... I don't know. I'm not sure. It seems so sudden and I have to consider ..."

"Consider what?" he asked, his eyes snapping.

"Well, consider whether we would make a good match."

"I would've thought you'd have settled that in your mind by now. I've been courting you for months – you've had plenty of time to gather your thoughts and make a decision. You must have known I'd ask you soon."

"Yes, it's just that ... I'm still not sure. Will you give me some time to think it through?"

He dropped his arm to his side, pushing her hand away. "Of course. Take all the time you need. Just know I may not be here waiting for you when you finally choose." He turned to walk away, then faced her again, his countenance furious. "Is it him? Is he the reason you need time to think?" he spat, his eyes narrowing at her.

"Him?" she whispered.

"The sheriff. It's because of him, isn't it? You think he wants you. But if he did, don't you think he'd have said something before now? And if he cares for you, the way you obviously hope he does, where is he now? Tell me that."

She shook her head. "No, it's not because of him. I'm just not sure about us, that's all."

He sniffed, and strode back down the trail.

"Winston, wait!" she cried, hurrying after him.

He turned to face her. "No! Don't follow me, Camilla – I need some time alone. If you don't think we're a match, maybe I've been terribly mistaken about you."

As he marched away Camilla fell to her knees, her heart pounding in her chest. She lifted her hands to cover her mouth and bowed her head, her eyes closed. As she took deep breaths, she wondered how it had all gone so wrong so quickly. A few minutes ago, everything was wonderful – she was taking a romantic stroll with her beau in the twilight after a sumptuous Thanksgiving feast. She'd been happy. And then he'd proposed ...

... and her heart had leaped into her throat as panic washed over her. Why had she reacted so? Wasn't this what she'd wanted? But then he'd yelled at her — said horrid things. After the way Da had acted all her life, she knew she didn't want to tie herself to a man who allowed his temper to rule him that way.

She slowed her breathing to calm herself and opened her eyes. The valley was shrouded in growing darkness now, the first stars twinkling through the gossamer clouds low overhead. She hadn't realized how much time had passed since Winston left. She'd better head back

before it grew darker. If she didn't, it would become hard to find her way home, since they'd followed a winding, overgrown path she'd never walked before. She lurched to her feet and scurried back the way they'd come, starting at every grunt or rustle in the undergrowth.

Something dark blocked her way forward, about ten feet in front of her. She paused, willing her eyes to focus on the shadowy shape. Was it a tree stump? She didn't remember one being directly in the middle of the path. Perhaps she'd wandered from the trail? She rubbed her eyes and stepped forward slowly.

Then the shape moved. She gasped and froze. What was it? Now closer, her eyes were able to make out the curve of a shoulder, the length of a muscular back, and two pointed ears. A mountain lion!

It stepped toward her, lowering its powerful body into a crouch and she heard the cat hiss, low and steady. Adrenaline pumped through her body, sending her heart into a frenzy. She stepped cautiously backward along the trail, keeping her eyes trained on the animal. It stood unmoving, watching her retreat. She continued that way, her eyes never leaving the cat, until she could no longer see it. Then she turned, lifted her skirts with both hands and ran.

As she fled, she could hear it at times. It was stalking her, pacing her like the prey she was. When it screamed, a shiver ran up her entire body, chilling her to the bone. She soon gave up running, knowing it would only hasten the attack if the animal saw her fleeing. Instead she walked quickly, spinning around, trying to see where the beast was hiding in the woods around her. Now it was on her right, then her left, now in front of her, then behind. It moved around her, wearing her down, watching her every move.

Her breath formed clouds in front of her with each puff, and the cold bit through the fabric of her coat. She couldn't think clearly anymore, the panic that filled her mind was too great. She wanted to double back as soon as she was safe, trying to find her way home using a parallel route, but the animal had never let her, and she'd lost all track of which direction to take as she stumbled through the darkness.

Think, Camilla, think. Surely the Yellowstone River was around here somewhere. If she could only find the river, she'd know which way to go. But there was nothing around but the same dark, foreboding woods she'd traveled through for far too long already. *God help me find the river. Please –*

The cat screamed again, and she whimpered. Try as she might, she couldn't hold back the tears any longer. She was tired, cold and completely lost. She had no idea which way to go, and her mind was so befuddled by fear she couldn't think of what to do. This is how she would die – alone in the Montana wilderness, eaten by a mountain

lion. She slowed her pace, sobbing between the junipers and hemlock trees that stood guard on either side of her, hemming her in, obscuring her view and making every twist and turn she took look the same as the one before.

A tinkling sound broke through the silence, and she held her breath to listen. Water! It must be the river!

Swinging her head frantically from side to side, she found the river bank less than fifty feet to her left through a wall of tree branches. She hurried toward it, stepping out into the clearing by the edge of the water. Her booted feet sunk into the sand running the length of the shore, and she floundered through it, barely maintaining her balance.

Her sobbing turned to laughter, and she giggled hysterically in relief. She'd found the way home. If she followed it, it would take her all the way to Cutter's Creek. But did she need to go upriver, or down? She glanced skyward to get some indication of direction. No help there – the clouds covered the sky completely now, hanging low and gray over her.

She stopped to think. The river flowed northward into Cutter's Creek, and she was pretty sure she was north of town. So she should follow the river upstream to find her way back. She sighed with relief and ran her hands through her hair. She knew what to do now. She just prayed she'd make it. *Thank you for your guidance, Lord. Now, please keep me safe until I reach Cutter's Creek.* She strode along the river's edge, her feet sinking into the soft sand.

A sound to her right caught her attention, and she stared into the black woods. The mountain lion was there, still shadowing her. With her eyes focused on it, she kept hurrying forward, muttering a repeated prayer under her breath: *God help me, God help me, God help me.*

She saw the cat crouch and spring toward her. It had finally decided to attack, and she had nowhere to go. If she ran forward, the sand would slow her down – not that it would matter, since the cat would catch her regardless. She couldn't climb past it into the woods. And the water was cold as the Atlantic –

In three enormous strides it had almost reached her, and leaped into the air, claws extended and fangs bared! She had no other choice – she flung herself into the icy river with a cry, falling forward and wading out into the depths as quickly as her legs could carry her.

The cat had landed on the bank where she'd stood a moment earlier and watched her splash and stumble in the water, its tail twitching with displeasure. Once she was chest-deep she stopped, fighting the strong current pulling and tugging at her long skirts as they swirled around her shaking legs. She stood there, teeth chattering with the cold, and waited, her eyes never leaving the cat. It paced along the riverbank, watching her just as intently.

It was no use – the animal intended to wait for her to leave the water. A likelihood she'd have to face soon enough – she'd freeze before much longer. And the opposite bank was too far away, the river too deep to cross. She turned away from the mountain lion and began walking upstream toward town. She didn't know how long she could continue that way, but at least she was doing something other than waiting to die.

After a few minutes she noticed that the cat hadn't followed her. At least she couldn't see it anywhere on the bank, which was now steep and had no beach to climb. She kept moving, her teeth pressed so tightly together she wasn't sure they'd ever part again, her arms wrapped around her shaking body. Her mind became foggy, her thoughts muddled. Where was the town? How much farther? Surely she'd reach it soon.

The bank fell, and another beach emerged in the darkness. She waded toward it, stumbling onto the sandy shore. She tried to run, but tumbled immediately onto her stomach. She pushed herself up with her hands and lurched forward again, floundering toward the edge of the woods, then turning to follow the river once more. She would make it. It couldn't be much farther.

Something wet landed on her nose, and she stared up in wonder. What was that? Lifting her face skyward, she gazed up to see small white flakes falling through the dark all around her. Oh no – it was snowing. She had to get to town soon or she'd freeze out here. Already it was hard to place one foot in front of the other.

The woods opened up, and she ran into a clearing, her chest heaving as she fought desperately for air to fill her tired lungs. A bridge – she could see a bridge up ahead. She knew that bridge ... but it was two miles from Cutter's Creek. There was no way she'd make it in this condition. It was over. She had nothing left to give.

She fell face down into the thin snow. Her eyes blinked closed and she drifted into unconsciousness.

Charlotte paced back and forth before the fireplace, wringing her hands in front of her. "Where is she?" she pleaded, her eyes falling on Estelle's pale face.

"Don't worry, my dear, they'll find her."

"They should have found her already!"

Estelle didn't respond. They both knew it wasn't a good sign that Harry, Winston, Justin and Sam had still not returned with Camilla.

"How could he have left her out there all alone?" Charlotte's words became a cry, and she fell onto the love seat, her hands covering her

eyes. "Something must have happened to her, or she'd have come back." Suddenly her eyes narrowed in accusation. "What was Winston thinking? Why did he leave her out there?"

Margaret hastened to her side, and placed her hand on Charlotte's arm. "I'm sure everything will be well. She's just lost her way – she'll find the path again soon."

Charlotte's red eyes found Estelle's, begging for confirmation.

"It will be okay, dear. Come now, let's pray. It's something we can do right now to help her."

Charlotte nodded through the tears, and the women bowed their heads to intercede on Camilla's behalf with their Heavenly Father. Charlotte felt a peace come over her as they prayed, and saw a picture in her mind's eye of Camilla lying on the ground, eyes closed in a colorless face. She gasped and felt her heart drop. *Father, protect my sister. Please don't leave her side.*

The sound of hooves outside on the drive made Charlotte's eyes fly open. She leaped to her feet and ran to the front door, flinging it open and stepping out into the cold night. A gray mare stood in front of her, sweat darkening her heaving sides. Sheriff Brentwood climbed from her back, and strode toward Charlotte. "Sheriff Brentwood?"

"Mrs. Brown, good to see you." He removed his hat as he spoke, leaving his hair plastered against his scalp. His eyes flitted back and forth, scanning the doorway behind her with interest.

"What are you doing here?" asked Charlotte, confused. "Have you come to help find Cammie?"

His eyes sparked. "Find Cammie? Is she lost?"

"Yes, we don't know where she is. She and Winston took a walk earlier, and he came back alone around dusk without her. The men have been out looking for her for hours now – they should have been back by now. I'm beside myself, I don't know what to do ..."

"Which direction did she take?" He spun on his heel, returning his hat to his head and vaulting onto the waiting horse's back.

"South, I believe. Toward town."

He spun the horse around and dipped his hat at her, his eyes flashing. "Don't worry, Charlotte. I'll find her and bring her back to you." And then he was gone as quickly as he'd come, with only the noise of galloping hooves on the grassy slope to show he'd been there.

Chapter Twenty-One

Clifford bent over Tilly's neck, urging her forward. She was tired, he could tell – her steps lacked their usual vigor — and he wasn't surprised. They'd covered a lot of miles today, and he'd pushed her faster and further than he normally would. He'd been so determined to make it back to Cutter's Creek, he hadn't wanted to stop and camp when the sun set. A good thing, too, given the current situation.

"Come on, girl, you can do it," he urged her. "Not long now until I tuck you away in your warm stable for the night and feed you your favorite meal of oats and turnips. Just hold on for a bit longer, okay?"

He'd formulated a plan to search for Camilla. She was a smart woman, and would no doubt try to make her way to town via either the wagon track or the river. It was dark tonight, so she wouldn't be able to see far. He'd decided to follow the road to town first, then double back along the river. He prayed he'd find her close to one or the other. If only he had a dog – he'd often thought of getting one, but his bachelor lifestyle had turned him against the idea.

He glanced up with a frown as small, wet snowflakes began to fall all around him, and cursed under his breath. He knew the clock was ticking. If this snowfall was more than a few flurries, Camilla's survival time would be severely limited. He noticed it was sticking to the ground and falling fast. He grimaced – it wasn't looking like it would stop anytime soon.

The scream of a mountain lion pierced the silence, and he shuddered and felt Tilly balk beneath him. "There, there, girl. You're okay. Let's keep going." He patted her neck and scanned the woods on either side of the wagon track for any sign of the cat. But the cry had come from some distance away, and he didn't think it would bother a galloping horse and her rider even if it had been close by. He hoped for Camilla's sake it was nowhere near her.

A couple of miles from town, he slowed Tilly to a trot. The snow was falling so heavily and lay so thick on the ground now, it was becoming impossible for him to see shapes or movement as they traveled. He studied the landscape around him for any sign of Camilla and frowned. If she'd left any footprints on the ground, the snow would cover them now, and unless she was still moving, there would be no fresh trail to follow. He only hoped she was walking – maybe he'd catch some prints in the snow before they were wiped out by fresh snowfall.

He saw the bridge over the Yellowstone River up ahead, the point before town where the wagon trail and river intersected. After he'd made it to town, he'd return to this place and follow the river back. If she made it this far, she'd no doubt follow the trail rather than the river into town. He'd been praying the entire way, and he said another quick prayer now. If he was going to find her in this weather, he'd need divine intervention.

He pulled Tilly to a halt and scanned the river bank to his left. The slow-moving river gurgled happily, flowing black and smooth beneath the thick planks of the bridge. His eyes roved over the clearing beside the bridge where the woods held back, as though respectful of the merging of trail and river.

There was a large rock, flat on top, close to the trail, that he didn't remember being there. He doubted he'd recognize every rock along this trail, but something about it just didn't look right. He dismounted and led Tilly toward the rock, his eyes flitting back and forth to check everything in the quiet woods, the dark river and the sandy shore. Now that he was closer, it didn't look so much like a rock as an animal of some kind ... or a person!

He knelt beside it and brushed the snow away. It was Camilla! *Thank you, God!* His heart lurched in his chest, and he quickly lowered his face to listen for a breath. It was there; she was still breathing, although shallowly. He removed his gloves to touch her skin - cold, very cold. Donning his gloves again, he lifted her into his arms and stood to his feet. She lolled like a rag doll, alarming him. He had to get her warm, and quickly.

Pulling Tilly close, he heaved Camilla over his shoulder and mounted. As soon as he was in the saddle, he sat Camilla in front of him, holding her in place with his arms. It wouldn't take much for her to slip from his grasp, so he held the reins with one hand, her torso firmly against him with the other.

"Let's go, girl." He clicked his tongue to the waiting animal and she set off at a canter, back toward Harry and Charlotte's house. He could take Camilla to town, but in that moment he wasn't sure where he'd go. Dr. Potter was away and had been for days, tending to his own daughter's firstborn in Bozeman. Sam and Estelle were at Harry and Charlotte's, and he wasn't sure who else was home on Thanksgiving night. No, he'd take her back to where her loved ones were. They'd know what to do. She needed them now.

As he rode, he continued to hold her close, willing his own warmth into her. It wasn't working. He pulled Tilly to a halt, opened his coat, removed his shirt and undershirt, stuffed them in a saddlebag and wrapped his coat around her, hoping his body heat would help. He shivered against the cold and snapped the reins, starting the mare

forward again.

After a mile or so, he felt movement against his chest. His eyes dropped and he opened his coat to look at her. She lay against him, eyes closed, perfect dark lashes against her fair, freckled cheeks. She looked to have a little more color in those cheeks than she had before, and seemed to be supporting herself some in the saddle.

Her eyelids flickered open and her gaze rested on his face. She smiled and mumbled something, but he couldn't tell what. She nestled closer into his chest, wrapping her arms around his bare torso, her cheek pressed against his skin. He shivered, but this time not from the cold – pleasure and relief coursed through his body in equal measure. Her eyes drifted closed again, and he wrapped her tighter in his coat.

Within minutes they made it to Harry and Charlotte's, and the noise of their arrival brought all the occupants from the house in a hurry. The men had obviously just returned empty-handed and now joined the women outside as he drew Tilly to a halt before them. "Hurry, she needs help!"

"It's Camilla!" said Charlotte, her eyes wide. "Is she okay?"

"Thank you, Sheriff, thank you!" Harry leaped from the porch to run and greet him. Sam and Winston hurried over as well, and the three men gently lifted her down from the saddle and carried her inside. The women rushed after the men, and shut the door behind them with a few cries of thanks over their shoulders.

Clifford was left standing beside his exhausted horse, shirtless and alone in the falling snow. He removed his coat to pull on his undershirt and shirt, then, he donned the coat once more and pushed his hat back onto his head. He looked at Tilly, fatigue filtering through his body from his head down to his toes. "Can you believe that?" he asked his horse. "Didn't even offer me a cup of coffee."

Tilly snorted and shook snow from her mane.

"Yeah, I bet you would've liked a nice feedbag yourself. Oh well. Let's go home, girl."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Camilla's eyes flitted open, and she moaned as a headache goaded her into consciousness.

"Are you awake?" Charlotte was standing beside her bed, her eyes full of concern.

Camilla nodded with a weak smile. "Can't talk," she rasped.

"It's okay, you don't have to. Just rest. Would you like some broth?"

She nodded again, and Charlotte left the room, returning shortly with a bowl of steaming soup on a tray. She laid the tray across Camilla's lap, and Camilla slurped on a hot spoonful. It was delicious, and her stomach grumbled loudly in response. "Thank you," she whispered.

"You're welcome. You gave us quite the scare." Charlotte ran her hands over her disheveled hair, which had been pulled back into a chignon for Thanksgiving and not touched since. "We thought we'd lost you."

Memories flooded Camilla's thoughts and she gasped. "I was lost. It's all comin' back to me. Winston and I took a walk together, and he proposed ..."

"He proposed?" Charlotte's eyes went wide in surprise and her hand flew to her throat. "What did you say?"

"I said I needed time to think about it. He marched off in a rage and left me there." Her eyes filled with tears. "I couldn't find my way back – it was horrible. I was hunted by a mountain lion, and I dove into the freezin' river. I thought I'd die. How did you find me?"

Charlotte took Camilla's hand in hers and stroked it gently, her own cheeks wet with tears. "Sheriff Brentwood came by unexpectedly while the men were out searching for you. I told him what had happened, and he left to search too. When he returned he had you with him, wrapped in his coat."

Camilla remembered a fleeting glimpse of a bare, muscled chest, of chiseled features looking down at her with fear in his eyes, the scent of leather and sweat. She closed her eyes, picturing it all in her mind and her cheeks flushed warm. "Oh ... that's right. I remember ridin' in front of him." She lifted a hand to rub her forehead. Where was he now? Had he waited to see if she was all right? She should thank him for rescuing her. She attempted to stand, and fell back on the bed with a cry.

"No, no. I'm your doctor for now, my dear, and I order bed rest for

you. No walking around today.” Charlotte lifted a hand to brush Camilla’s cheek. “Your fever has abated, thank the Good Lord for that. You’re on the mend.”

“How long’s it been?” she whispered.

“Three days.”

“Three days?!” Her eyebrows arched in dismay. “I have to thank the sheriff. He’ll think I’m ungrateful.”

“No, he won’t. He’s been by every day to see how you’re doing, and we’ve thanked him profusely on your behalf. You just focus on getting better.”

“Every day?”

“Yes.”

“Today?”

“No, I’m sure he’ll be here any moment.” Charlotte looked toward the door, the sound of crying capturing her attention. “Oh dear, that’s Anna. I’d better go see what the matter is. Thank goodness for Mary, or I’d have gone mad. There are children and invalids in every room of this house.” She stood to leave.

“Sorry,” rasped Camilla with a lopsided grin.

“Never mind, my darling sister – I’m just so thankful you’re well.” Another noise, this from outside. “Oh heavens, now someone’s at the door as well.” Charlotte strode out, leaving Camilla alone with her thoughts.

The last thing she remembered clearly was leaping into the river and watching the big cat pace up and down the riverbank as it waited for her to come back. She was certain she wouldn’t make it. How had the sheriff found her? It must have been almost impossible in the darkness and snow. Did she make it back to shore somehow? How had she escaped the predator waiting for her there? She couldn’t recall.

But she could remember the Sheriff’s scent, her cheek pressed against his bare chest. With eyes closed, she pictured the look in his eyes and the beard that tickled the top of her head, the warmth of his embrace, the firmness of his muscular torso against her cold, wet body ... she trembled, and felt a deep yearning to have him hold her again.

Her eyes flew open – what was wrong with her?! She was practically engaged to Winston – Winston, who she hadn’t even thought of since she awoke. Winston, who’d abandoned her to the fates when she didn’t immediately say yes to his proposal. Where was he? Was he sorry he’d left her behind that day? Was he at least racked with guilt over it? Part of her hoped he hadn’t been too hard on himself. Part of her hoped he had.

Just then, Charlotte entered with Winston in tow. He held his hat in his hands, turning it awkwardly as he stood at the foot of her bed. His eyes roamed the room, resting only for a moment on her face. He

looked extremely uncomfortable.

Despite herself, she felt sorry for him. "Winston, I'm so glad you came," she whispered, holding out her hand.

He edged around the bed to take her hand and kissed it before kneeling beside the bed. Anxious eyes found hers and rested there. "I'm so ashamed, Cammie. I should never have left you out there. Please forgive me."

She nodded and smiled, pressing her other hand on top of his. "Of course."

"You could have died ... and I ..." He choked on the words and placed his free hand on his forehead, his eyes closed as he composed himself.

"It's okay. I'm fine. Really, I forgive you. You didn't know ..." Her voice had returned a little, but her throat felt raw and she knew she wouldn't be able to say much more.

Charlotte left the room, no doubt to attend to the children. Camilla heard her exclamation down the hall, "My heavens, the door again?! I'll never get anything done at this rate. Mary – please, can you see what Johnny wants? He's bawling in the living room and I have no idea what's happened. I have to get the door." She grinned, picturing Charlotte's reddened face in her mind. Poor dear.

She heard the front door open and a murmur of voices. Soon Charlotte entered her room again, this time with Sheriff Brentwood trailing her, her eyebrows arched in amusement.

Winston stood to his feet, frowning. "Sheriff, it's good to see you. Thank you again for finding Cammie. You saved her life, and I'll be forever grateful." He shook Clifford's hand vigorously, though obviously uncomfortable with being indebted to the man.

"Happy to be of assistance. I see she's awake." He skirted Winston and made his way to Camilla, removing his hat and standing just out of her reach. "Cammie, I hope you're feeling better."

She nodded and smiled warmly at him. "Thank you, Sheriff. You saved me." Her voice croaked and she lifted a hand to him.

He stepped forward to take it and held it firmly between his. He didn't reply, but his eyes twinkled at her and his lips curved into a half-grin.

"I have to ask," began Winston, moving toward them, "How did you end up soaking wet, Cammie?"

"The river," she whispered. "A mountain lion was after me, so I went into the river to escape it."

She thought she saw a look of admiration in the sheriff's eyes, as well as worry. "I heard that cat myself, when I was out looking for you. No wonder you almost froze. That river is like ice this time of year. Nonetheless, that was the right move – mountain lions hate

water, like most cats.”

“We heard it too,” added Winston lamely. “I’m so glad you escaped it.”

She closed her eyes and nodded her head, feeling exhaustion take over once again.

“All right now, it’s time for her to rest.” Charlotte ushered the two men from the room, but Camilla’s eyes didn’t open to see them leave. She’d drifted back into a dreamless sleep, where darkness was her only companion and the ache of a deep cold remembered chilled her to the bone.

Chapter Twenty-Three

December 1871

Camilla was happy to be out and about again. After a week of recovering indoors, she had been given permission by Charlotte to go to the church sledding party. It was Saturday, and everyone would be there. She wasn't allowed to ride a sled, mind you, just to watch others having fun. She sighed and smoothed the blanket draped across her legs as she sat on the hard wagon seat. At least she'd get some fresh air.

It was beautiful out today. Snow blanketed the ground in a dazzling display of white, and the sled rails Harry had fixed to the wagon flew over the thick powder, pulled by an eager pair of horses who'd been cooped up in the barn for days. Tree branches bowed toward the ground under the weight of the frozen piles adorning them. The pristine carpet was marked here and there by the tracks of bobcat, wolf and mule deer.

Camilla turned to smile at Charlotte beside her, who was almost lost in a sea of furs, blankets and wraps. Baby Anna was held close in her arms. The sun shone pale in the sky above, making the frozen landscape sparkle and gleam, and Camilla had to squint when they crossed the river at the brightness of the reflection on the water's smooth surface.

Before long, they reached the sloping hill in front of the little red chapel where the townsfolk had gathered. Sleighs and wagons were parked at the base, and children ran and tumbled up and down the hill, dragging makeshift sleds behind them. Their reddened faces beamed beneath earmuffs, hats and scarves, and she could hear their laughter and chattering voices as they drew closer.

Harry parked the wagon and helped Charlotte, Mary and the children to the ground. They shuffled off, and he reached for Camilla's hand. She stepped down cautiously, careful to favor her swollen ankle – she'd re-injured it during her night in the woods, and it was still painful. Her eyes scanned the gathering, taking in the familiar faces, picnic baskets and blazing bonfire that had been lit in the center of it all to keep warm those waiting at the base of the hill. She pulled her woolen shawl more tightly around her shoulders and pushed her hands into the fur muff that hung from it.

Her eyes found Winston beside the bonfire, one hand raised in

greeting. She'd barely spoken to him since that night, and still hadn't answered his question. Other than his one visit, he seemed to be avoiding her – no doubt ashamed of the part he'd played in her misadventure. She really had forgiven him, but he still acted uncomfortable and distant.

Worse still, Clifford had only visited her the one time, and she hadn't seen or heard from him since. Whenever she asked Charlotte or Harry about him, they said they hadn't seen him either. It was driving her to distraction – why hadn't he come to check on her again? Didn't he care at all?

He was so exasperating! One moment, he did something wonderful that seemed to show he had feelings for her, and the next he acted as though he never thought of her. No doubt the latter was true and she was only imagining he cared for her. He'd certainly never spoken of it, let alone come courting. In all likelihood, he'd just been doing his job when he rescued her that night. He was the sheriff, after all. It was his duty to help.

But then, why had he come to Harry and Charlotte's house on Thanksgiving night when he should have been celebrating somewhere with family and friends? She blanched. Perhaps he didn't have any family or friends. They should have invited him to share their meal. Her heart ached at the thought. She remembered hearing that he'd left his family back east years ago. But he must have friends, surely ... everyone seemed fond of him.

She shook all thoughts of Clifford from her head and hobbled toward Winston, a smile on her face. She was glad to see him and hoped he'd get past the awkwardness soon. He greeted her and offered her his arm, and they walked over to join the rest of the group. The fire crackled and snapped, warming her face and hands. All around them, folks talked and laughed together, watching the children as they rode their sleds down the hill with screams of delight.

Just then, she noticed there were several men at the top of the hill amongst the children, including Clifford. She recognized him even from a distance – his broad shoulders, athletic physique and long-tailed coat made him stand out. She felt her heart flutter at the sight of him.

He leaned forward to hold a sled in place, lodging one foot in front of it. Then with a hearty laugh, he grabbed a small boy and planted him on the sled, eliciting squeals of anticipation. He added another boy to the sled and pushed them down the hill, standing to watch their progress.

But it was immediately obvious that the boys were in trouble. Their sled sped off at an angle rather than straight down the hill, and they were soon careening over hillocks and tussocks buried beneath the

snow, the sled sailing through the air to land with a whack against the ground. They yelled and tried hard to turn their vehicle around, but without success.

Clifford took off at a run, still mischievously grinning, and pursued them down the hill. Thankfully, their pace slowed as the sled progressed. Right before they hit the trunk of an enormous juniper, he grasped the sled from behind and pulled them to a stop. All those watching around the fire applauded and exclaimed, calling out congratulations to him, and he gave a mock bow. The boys climbed off the sled, righted their caps and headed back up the hill, chattering excitedly with the sheriff.

Camilla stood still, her eyes fixed on him. He interacted with the children with such ease, and it was obvious from the way they flocked around him, begging for his attention, that they adored him. A small girl lifted her hands up to him, and he picked her up to set her on his hip and nodded in thoughtful contemplation while she pointed out some marvel she'd discovered in the snow.

Camilla was enthralled. Was this the sheriff who barely spoke a word to most people, the strong, silent loner? He didn't look that way today, laughing and chatting with the children and men at the top of the slope.

"Are you okay, Cammie? Can I get you anything?" asked Winston.

"No, thank you. I think I'll take a short stroll."

"Fine. I see Justin over yonder – I want to chat to him about the winter feed supply." Winston dipped his hat with a smile and headed for his brother, who was talking to Reverend Latsch on the other side of the bonfire.

Camilla watched him leave – in an awful hurry, she thought – then turned to pick her way carefully across the snow. She reached the base of the hill, where a group of children were working hard to build a snowman. As she approached, she could hear they were quarreling over which item would make a better nose. "No, that stick looks like a duck's bill - ya can't use that," a girl with red mittens and a matching cap insisted. She stamped her booted foot in the snow. "Everyone'll think it a snow-duck, not a snow-man."

"It does not – it'll be just fine," replied a boy, who looked to be her brother and was a foot taller than she.

"Does too!"

"Does not."

Camilla studied the ground and reached down to select a fine, pointed stick. "Can I help?" she interjected, right as the girl raised her foot to stomp her brother's boot.

The girl turned, the frown on her little face disappearing rapidly at the sight of Camilla's smile. "Yes, ma'am."

“How about this – would it work for a nose, do you think?” Camilla held out the stick.

The girl studied it, a wrinkle of concentration between her blue eyes. “I believe so,” she grinned at Camilla.

“Wonderful – here you are, then.” A shout behind Camilla made her spin around, just as a trio of children flew by on a sled, stopping when its nose dug into a drift close by.

She smiled, shifted her gaze back to the top of the hill and saw Clifford climbing onto a sled. He adjusted his seat, then with both hands grabbed the rope hooked around the front of the toboggan . Two boys pushed him with a yell, and he took off down the hill at an alarming pace. He shouted as he went, leaning forward to increase his speed. As he hit the bottom a great cloud of powder filled the air around him, and he flew headfirst into the snowdrift.

Camilla picked up her skirts and ran to him. He couldn’t have been hurt – the snow was too thick and soft - but as he lay there her heart dropped. Just as she reached him, though, she heard him laughing. His whole body shook, he rolled over to look up at the sky and his eyes caught hers with a twinkle. She couldn’t help joining him in laughter, and reached out a hand. “I suppose it’s my turn to rescue you,” she said as she helped him to his feet.

“And I’m eternally grateful to you.” He grinned and picked up his hat, still embedded in the drift at his feet. He stood close to her, and she trembled at the spark between them. Her whole body felt as though it was on fire. Her eyes remained fixed on his, and she saw his crinkle at the edges as he watched her.

She should say something, break the unbearable silence – if only because she was afraid what she might do if one of them didn’t speak soon. She was already resisting the urge to throw her arms around his neck. He seemed to be enjoying her discomfort, his eyes narrowed and his smile widened, but still he didn’t talk.

Finally she dropped her gaze and linked her hands behind her back. “I’ve barely seen you since ... well, since I woke up. I wanted to make sure to thank you for saving me that night. I would have died if you hadn’t found me.”

He dusted the snow from his hat. “You’re welcome. I’m just glad I found you when I did. Much later and I don’t know ...” His voice drifted off and the smile left his face. A muscle in his jaw clenched and he moved closer to her. She stepped back, but he took another step toward her, closing the gap. She looked up into his face again, and her eyes widened. His eyes were intense, he his expression tortured.

He reached a hand toward her, then dropped it back to his side with a sigh. “Cammie, I ...”

She waited, hoping.

“I ... I’m glad you’re all right.” The muscle in his jaw flexed again, and he nodded at her before turning to leave.

She watched him stalk away, sighed and rubbed her face with her hands. What had he been trying to tell her? Did he have feelings for her after all? If he did, why didn’t he just say so? What was holding him back? It was almost as though he was fighting within himself over something.

Sheriff Brentwood was turning out to be an enigma – so many different, contradictory facets, such depth – so much more to him than first impressions would suggest. She shivered, imagining his touch on her skin, his lips on hers. She was falling in love with him, she knew that now. And the knowledge helped her finally make a decision she should have made long ago.

Winston Frank was a good man, and would likely make someone a good husband. But she didn’t love him, and she couldn’t marry him. Not when Clifford was all she could think about.

Chapter Twenty-Four

When Camilla approached Winston to tell him of her decision, he'd hurriedly explained that he had to leave and would see her later. She'd only been able to say they needed to talk – he promised to return to town that afternoon to speak with her, but there was something urgent he had to attend to back at his ranch.

She'd nodded and watched him leave, relief in her heart. She wasn't looking forward to their conversation and postponing it, even for a few hours, felt like a reprieve. She regretted letting their relationship continue as long as she had, but how could she have known she didn't love him? She'd never been in love before. It wasn't until her feelings for Clifford had grown that she'd realized how love felt, and that she didn't feel that for Winston.

Besides, it didn't look like she was Winston's top priority either.

She helped Mary and Charlotte pack their things in the wagon to leave. They couldn't stay longer, since Lady Cheryl and Lord Edward had stayed home, and Charlotte didn't want to leave them alone too long. Her mother's health was deteriorating rapidly – it was only a matter of time until she passed. The thought made Camilla's throat ache with grief, and she pressed her fingers to her eyes.

"Is everything alright?"

It was Clifford. He walked over to where she stood by the wagon. They were hidden from the group by sleighs and wagons, and he stepped close to her and brushed his hand against her cheek. Her heart thumped wildly in her chest, and her eyelids fluttered closed for a moment.

"Cammie, I wanted to tell you something earlier. I'm sorry I held back – it's just that I lost someone a long time ago, and I've tried to guard my heart ever since."

She gazed at his face, her eyes traveling over his bare head, the bold blue of his eyes, the angular cheeks and full lips.

He cleared his throat and laid his hat on the wagon seat beside her. "I love you."

Her eyes grew wide and her mouth dropped open in surprise. She'd been expecting him to say he wanted to court her or get to know her better, perhaps that he cared for her. But to say that he loved her – that was unforeseen. "Oh!" was all she could think to say.

He arched an eyebrow, watching her closely, then stepped closer and lifted both hands to cup her face. "Oh?" he said with a smile.

“Anything else you’d like to add?”

She smirked and narrowed her eyes. “It’s about time.”

He threw his head back and laughed out loud before tilting her face to meet his. “Yes, it is,” he whispered against her lips. Then he kissed her.

She closed her eyes and melted into the moment, the bliss of his hands tenderly caressing her face, the warmth of his lips as they explored hers. A spasm of pleasure rushed through her body, making her legs tremble as he deepened the kiss.

She hadn’t spoken to Winston yet, and a sudden pang of guilt swept through her. She couldn’t start a new relationship until she’d ended her current one, could she? It was only fair to Winston that she release him before she moved on. She pulled away with great reluctance, running her fingertips over his lips and chewing on her own bottom lip.

“What is it?” he asked, his cheeks flushed and his eyes swimming with desire.

“I have to speak with Winston first. I’m sorry.”

He smiled and linked his arms around her waist, pulling her close with a look of mischief on his face. “So you’re going to end things with him?”

“Yes,” she laughed as he aimed for another kiss. She skillfully dodged it and looked up at him from under half-lidded eyes. “Clifford!”

He chuckled and released her with a bow. “Please hurry, so I can kiss you without interruption.”

“Well, I’m not sure that’d be entirely proper ...” Adrenaline coursed through her veins, and she couldn’t think clearly, not with him still standing so close to her. His muscular arms hung by his sides now, and she wished they were around her waist again, his firm body pressed against hers.

“Proper or not, I look forward to doing that again,” he whispered, leaning in close to look deep into her eyes. She trembled, feeling as though her legs might give way beneath her if she didn’t leave now.

“Cammie, are you ready to go?” Charlotte’s voice broke through their reverie, and they stepped apart quickly. Charlotte was holding Anna beneath some blankets at her chest. Only the cherub’s face showed, her eyes firmly shut as she slept in the warmth of her mother’s embrace.

“Yes, I’m ready. Thank you, Sheriff – good to see you again.” She dipped her head.

He grabbed his hat from the wagon seat and put it onto his head with a grin and a nod to Charlotte. “You’re welcome. I’ll see you soon.” He shot her a knowing glance and strode back down to rejoice

the sledding party.

Charlotte watched him leave and turned to face Cammie, one eyebrow cocked. "What was that?"

"What?"

"Don't 'what' me. The two of you were standing awfully close together when I arrived just now." She grinned and tugged playfully at Cammie's woolen shawl. "Come now, sister, you must tell – are you in love with the good sheriff? I must say, he's very manly. I told you long ago when we sat on the porch together that manliness was a good quality to find in a beau, didn't I?"

Camilla felt herself blush under Charlotte's gaze and smiled despite herself. "Yes, you did."

"And he rescued you. That's very romantic, and a most attractive quality in a man."

Camilla nodded.

"So? I'm an old matron now – you have to let me live vicariously through you. Tell me everything!"

"He's wonderful. And warm and kind and very attractive, obviously. But he's also thoughtful, and intelligent ... oh, just about everything I could want. But I can't think clearly when I'm around him – I turn into a mute fool half the time, and tingle from head to toe."

Charlotte sighed and patted Camilla's arm. "Yes, that sounds about right. You're in love. I'm so happy for you, my dear."

"In love? Do you think so?"

"It sounds very much like it. So what are you going to do about Winston? I'm assuming you don't feel the same way about him – for if you do, then you're in real trouble."

"No, I don't feel that way about Winston, and I don't know that I ever did. He's good as well, and would make a fine husband and father. I can't criticize anything about him, other than perhaps his temper – he did leave me alone in the woods at dusk. I'm going to talk to him when he comes callin' this afternoon. I meant to speak to him here, but he had to rush home."

"Well, it will be difficult, but it's all for the best. Let's get home so you can prepare yourself. Mother will love to hear all about it as well."

"Must we tell people?" asked Camilla, feeling a little embarrassed to share such new and personal feelings so quickly.

Charlotte's face fell. "I don't know how much more time she has. Any little piece of news cheers her so, and I do want to share any joy I can with her."

Camilla wrapped her arm around Charlotte's shoulders. "Oh, Charlotte, I'm so sorry. Of course we can tell her. Let's go, shall we?" They climbed into the wagon, soon joined by Harry, Mary and

Johnny, and set off for home. Camilla's mind was full of Winston and how he might react, Clifford's face and the heated kiss they'd shared, and the excitement of a future unknown but now full of possibility.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Winston, wait! Please stop – just listen to me! Come back!” Camilla ran after him as he stormed from the house, the door closing with a thud behind him. She opened it and followed him out into the yard.

Winston was already mounting his black gelding. “Out of my way, woman!” he cried, charging forward.

She stood her ground. “Calm down, please. Where are you goin’ in such a hurry? Let’s talk about this.”

“What is there to say?” His eyes bored holes in her, and his face was flaming.

“Let’s talk –”

“I have nothing I wish to discuss with you. And there’s someone else I need to see.” He wheeled the horse around her and galloped down the hill toward town.

Camilla sighed and ran her hands through her hair. That couldn’t have gone much worse. She’d been nervous to speak with him, and apparently with good reason. They’d sat together on the loveseat in the living room and he’d taken her hands, a look of affection on his face. But as soon as he’d heard that she didn’t intend to marry him, he’d dropped her hands and jumped to his feet with a cry: “It’s him, isn’t it? I knew it! You’re in love with the dadblasted sheriff!”

Taken by surprise, she wasn’t sure how to react or what to say. “Winston, I’m sorry, truly I am. I didn’t mean to hurt you, but I only recently learned what was in my own heart. I don’t know why it took me so long. I wasn’t being dishonest, I assure you.”

“Is that so? Well, I’m sure you had help coming to that conclusion!”

Camilla hurried inside the house to find Charlotte. She had to tell her what had happened. She hoped he wouldn’t do anything foolish. Why did he have such a temper? What if he intended to harm Clifford? Well, she imagined Clifford could take care of himself after years of hunting down and capturing criminals, but she hoped Winston didn’t get in trouble over her.

Clifford stroked Tilly’s neck and fed her another turnip. “How’s it going, girl? Want to take a ride?” She crunched the turnip between her teeth and sniffed his pockets in search of another. He chuckled. “No more for now, my dear.” Her gray coat shone where he’d brushed

it, and he ran his hand over her back before arranging the saddle rug there. He lifted the saddle onto it and tightened the girth with a grunt.

Once again, his mind returned to Camilla and the kiss they'd shared beside the wagon earlier that day, the feel of her slender form pressed against his, her supple lips as they responded to him, the sparkle in her eyes ... he shook his head. What a wonder, that she returned his feelings. He couldn't have imagined that she felt the same way he did. He'd been so certain she'd be engaged to Winston when he returned from Bozeman.

Then, the night he'd found her beside the road, half frozen and near death, he'd made a decision to keep his distance. After all, he'd seen the look on Winston's face when he brought her back to the house. Winston was in love, any fool could see it. He could only assume she felt the same way. There would be no room for him in her heart – it belonged to another.

But when she'd helped him from the pile of snow this morning, the look in her eyes had given her away, and his heart had jumped in his chest at her touch, her smile, her flirtations. He smiled, remembering their exchange. He'd tried to tell her how he felt right then, but couldn't find the words. She was so beautiful, it took his breath away. When he looked at her, his mind became vacant. Instead, he'd walked away, cursing himself for his cowardice.

Later, he'd seen her walking to the wagons alone and jumped at the second chance to finally bare his heart. He knew that in all likelihood she'd turn him away. But he had to take the chance. Nothing in his life had changed since Marlene's death – it was still a dangerous world to bring a family into. But he knew now that he couldn't continue to live alone and afraid. He had to open his heart to someone, or he'd go mad with loneliness. The thrill of hunting down outlaws was no longer enough for him. He wanted a family and a home of his own. And he wanted it all with Camilla.

When she'd returned his kiss, it sent his heart soaring. And when she admitted she wanted to speak with Winston before they continued, he finally knew she cared for him. She would end things with Winston, and they could be together. He could hardly wait. He led Tilly from the stable into the yard and gathered up the reins to mount her.

The clattering of hooves on the road caught his ear, and he looked up to see who would be galloping through town at such a headlong pace. Winston Frank's black gelding jolted to a stop in front of the sheriff's office.

Uh-oh. Clifford flicked Tilly's reins around a hitching post, and walked toward him. "Everything okay there, Winston?" he asked, one eyebrow arched.

Winston leaped from the horse's back without a word, strode over and punched him in the jaw, taking him by surprise. A second punch connected with his stomach, knocking the wind out of him. He stepped backward and lifted his arms to block the next. "Whoa, whoa – what's going on?" he cried as he attempted to fill his lungs with air. Though he could probably guess. He caught the next jab with one hand and twisted Winston's arm around behind his back.

That elicited a shout of pain from the man. "Stop!"

"I didn't start it." Clifford reached for Winston's other hand, yanked it behind his back as well, and slipped his handcuffs around the other man's wrists, pushing him toward his office. Once they were inside, he pushed a chair toward Winston. "Take a seat."

Winston's face was red and his eyes dark. He sat down with a huff, and lowered his head to stare at the ground in front of him.

"Now, tell me what's going on?" asked Clifford, his voice solemn. "Unless you'd rather I just arrest you for assaulting an officer of the law."

"You! It's all your fault. She says she won't marry me, and it's all because of you, I know it is!"

Clifford felt his heart leap with joy in his chest. She'd said she would end things with Winston, but he hadn't been certain she would. If he was honest, he thought that perhaps she'd see Winston and change her mind. He was, after all, a better match for her on paper: a rancher that everyone around town said would make a fortune someday, a handsome man, a regular at Bible study, well-liked by all of Cutter's Creek. He wasn't a loner who barely spoke unless spoken to. He didn't chase down outlaws for a living. He suited her. But she'd chosen Clifford.

He worked hard to hide the smile threatening to spread across his face. "Oh, that's what this is about?"

"What else would it be?" snarled Winston.

"Well, you know, Camilla Brown is a woman – she makes up her own mind. You have to respect that."

"She was going to marry me, I know it! You did something or said something to make her change her mind, you damn Yankee!"

"Calm down, Winston – you know better than that. She can't help how she feels or who she feels it for. It's best you just come to terms with that and let things be."

Winston's eyes narrowed at Clifford before lowering his head with a quick nod. "You're right. I don't know what I could have done differently to make her love me. It doesn't mean you didn't deserve to be hit."

"Perhaps. But even so, you're spending the night in the cell here. You can't punch a sheriff like that, and you know it." Winston

scowled, but didn't fight as Clifford led him into a cell, locking the door behind him. "I'll be back soon with supper." He turned Winston around to remove his handcuffs, then walked out the door to find Tilly.

He had to see Camilla. There was nothing and no one standing in their way now, and he couldn't wait to be with her. He let the smile he'd stifled creep across his face, and by the time he climbed onto Tilly's back he was laughing out loud.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chickens scrambled for the coop, their wings flapping with glee. It was feeding time. Feathers flew and the noise of their cackles echoed over the valley.

Camilla threw handfuls of grain across the floor of the coop, and they hurried to peck and scratch at it with clawed feet. She loved feeding the animals. Having grown up in England without any livestock of her own, she'd been nervous at first, but now it was her favorite chore. The horses, cattle, chickens and even Alley, the tabby cat that slunk around the barn, were her friends, and she enjoyed their company more than she'd have ever thought possible.

She brushed her hands against her apron and carried the empty pail back into the barn to return it to its place beside the barrels of grain. A rat scurried from the open barrel and she quickly sealed it shut, wondering where Alley had gotten to. He was fat and sleek with so many rats to eat – maybe he couldn't keep up. She filled the cat's water bowl, then turned back to the house.

The chill of night was invading the air. She shivered and pulled her shawl close around her, watching the sun dip out of sight to send the valley into darkness. Smoke wound its way skyward from the small kitchen chimney, and she saw the glow of lamplight through the front window. The house always looked cozy at this time of day.

Inside, the squeals of hungry children met her the moment she opened the front door. Charlotte was in the kitchen preparing supper, and Johnny stood at her feet, hands clutching her skirts and his face screwed up as he howled. Anna, equally loud, squalled on a rug in the corner. Charlotte looked harassed and tired, but smiled at Camilla with her hands raised in defeat.

"You finish supper – I'll get Anna," said Camilla, patting her on the arm and hurrying to pick up the screaming baby. "There, there, darling." She rocked Anna back and forth, and the baby soon stilled, staring with wide blue eyes at her aunt's face. She carried Anna into the kitchen and cut a piece of bread with her free hand to give to Johnny. He sucked on it, sitting down with a soft thump at Charlotte's feet.

"Thank you!" exclaimed Charlotte, looking as though she might burst into tears at any moment.

"Don't mention it," said Camilla, still rocking Anna.

"This time of night is the worst."

“Yes, it is. But don’t worry, it gets better,” said Camilla, remembering her own experiences raising her siblings back in England.

“Goodness, I hope so. All right, I’ve finished with the soup, it just has to simmer. More bread is in the oven, and I’ll clean up after we eat. Mother was doing poorly the last time I looked in on her, I just want to run and check her again, if you don’t mind watching Johnny for me. I’ll take Anna in with me and feed her.”

“Of course, I’m happy to watch him. You go – I’ll keep an eye on supper as well.”

Charlotte kissed Camilla on the cheek and squeezed her arm. “Thank you – you’re wonderful.” She lifted Anna from Camilla’s arms and carried her down the hall toward the bedroom where Lady Cheryl had lain secluded since Thanksgiving.

Camilla poured some milk from the pitcher on the kitchen bench into a bowl, and sliced a few more pieces of bread. She dipped the bread into the milk and carried both to the dining table. “Come, Johnny – I have more bread for you,” she sang.

He stood unsteadily to his feet and toddled after her, still sucking on the piece she’d given him. His chubby cheeks were reddened by the cold air, his blue eyes still filled with tears. He looked so much like Harry, but with fairer hair and blue eyes instead of brown. She smiled and lifted him onto his chair, placing the bowl before him.

She could hear Charlotte’s voice down the hall. It rose and fell, and she thought it sounded tearful. With Johnny settled, she tiptoed toward the room and stopped to listen.

“Oh Mother, but what will I do without you?”

“You will go on, my dear. And you will do fine.” Lady Cheryl’s voice cut off with a hacking cough. Then she spoke again. “I know it’s difficult for you to hear, but I’m ready. It’s my time. I’ve lived a good life, a happy life. And I’m glad to go now to be with my Lord. You’ll understand one day, my dear. I’m sorry to leave you and your darling family, and your father, of course. Be kind to him, Charlotte – I’m afraid he won’t know what to do with himself. He’ll need your help.”

As Charlotte sobbed, Camilla found herself unable to walk away, even though she knew she should. Her eyes brimming with tears, she covered her mouth with her hand.

“I will, Mother, I promise I will. Only please don’t leave us.”

“I’m afraid this is one thing I can’t bend to my will.” Camilla could hear the smile in Lady Cheryl’s words.

“I’ll miss you so, Mother.”

“I know, my dear. I’ll miss you too.”

Camilla tiptoed to the dining table, her cheeks streaked with tears. It tore her heart out to hear Charlotte’s pain, and to know that Lady

Cheryl didn't have much longer. She knew how devastated her sister-in-law would be.

"Cammie?" said a small voice.

She looked down to see Johnny's concerned face, his eyes fixed firmly on her tear-stained cheeks. She wiped them dry with the corner of her apron, and bent to smile at him. "Everythin's just fine, Johnny. Aunty Cammie needed a little cry. But don't you worry, everythin'll be just fine –"

A knock at the door interrupted her and she stood straight, running her hand over her auburn hair self-consciously. I wonder who that is? Heaven only knows what I look like after the day I've had.

She walked to the door and opened it to see Clifford Brentwood standing there, hat in hand. His blue eyes sparkled at her. "Clifford, what on earth are you doing here at this time of night?"

He laughed. "Well, that's quite a greeting."

She felt her cheeks flush, "Sorry. I mean, it's good to see you."

"I was hoping we could take a walk."

She blanched. "Surely you jest! I don't think I'll ever take another walk at night as long as I live."

He chuckled. "Good point. How about we walk to the barn and back? Do you think you could manage that?"

She nodded, "Just a moment – let me see if Harry will watch Johnny." She returned to the house and through the back door to find Harry sharpening a knife in the outside pantry. He followed her in to watch Johnny, and she joined Clifford outside, pulling her shawl around her shoulders, drawing a deep breath of frigid air into her lungs and hugging her arms to her chest.

They fell in, side-by-side, and wandered together toward the barn. "I guess you told Winston you didn't want to marry him," chuckled Clifford.

Her eyes flew wide, "Oh dear, what did he say? Did he come to see you? Oh, I knew he would."

He laughed, turned and grasped her arms with his strong hands. "Yes, he did. And I have a bruise or two to show for it." He pointed to the knot forming on the side of his mouth.

Camilla lifted a hand to run her fingers gently over the mark. "Oh no! He hit you? I'm so sorry."

"Never mind. I've survived worse. Anyhow, he's spending the night in lock-up to think it through."

"He is? Oh, this is terrible."

He slipped his hands behind her waist and pulled her toward him, a look of hunger in his eyes. "Let's not talk about Winston any longer. I have other things I'd like to discuss with you."

She slanted her face towards his and felt she might explode with

pleasure when his lips found hers. This time they were urgent and full of desire as they tugged at hers. Nibbling, tasting and pressing against his mouth, she explored it in new ways. She wrapped her arms around his neck and stood on tiptoe, her body swamped with desire, and she moaned.

After an eternity he pulled away, his eyes still closed, and tugged her hands from his neck to place them in his. She looked at him, eyebrows arched in question.

Then he knelt before her, and she gasped and giggled with delight. "My darling Cammie, my life has been changed because of you. I can never go back to the lonely life I was leading before I met you. I want to spend all my days with you by my side. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

Her heart thudded in her chest and she felt a wave of joy sweep over her as she looked at his upturned face. His eyes were full of love, his bearded face parted by a wide grin. His strong hands covered hers, and she turned hers over to stroke his fingers as tears filled her eyes. "Yes, I will. I can't imagine wantin' anythin' more than I do you."

He leaped to his feet and took her back into his arms to kiss her again. When they parted, they linked hands, fingers intertwined. "And I don't want to wait," Clifford added, his eyes gleaming. "I think we should do it soon."

"I agree," said Camilla, surprising herself. Where was the panic? Shouldn't she get to know him better first? But now there was nothing holding her back. She wanted to marry him, and felt nothing but excitement at the prospect.

"Let's tell everyone," said Clifford, pulling her toward the house.

Camilla paused. After the exchange she'd heard minutes earlier between Charlotte and her mother, she wasn't sure it was the best time to share their good news. Then she remembered what Charlotte had told her – that any good news could bring a small joy to Lady Cheryl. "Yes, lets," she agreed, following him inside.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

For Camilla, the church service in the little red chapel that Sunday was torturous. With Clifford by her side, she could think of nothing but his touch, his kisses, his body against hers. Rev. Latsch's sermon floated over her head, and the worship that usually made her heart soar slipped by – she was unable to remember a single note they sang. “How will I ever gather my thoughts to concentrate on a single thing again if you're to be my husband?” she whispered in his ear with a giggle as they rose to sing the final hymn.

He grinned and his hand brushed against hers, sending a thrill up her arm that made her flesh goose-pimple.

Afterward, she hurried to the front of the chapel to see her friend Willow Carlson. Jack Carlson, Jr. had arrived two weeks earlier and was cradled in her arms. Camilla bent over the tiny baby to watch him blink and coo. She smiled and stroked his face with her fingertips. “Oh Willow, he's gorgeous. And getting so big already.”

“How are you, Cammie?” asked Willow with a sigh. She looked tired, with dark circles beneath her eyes.

“I'm wonderful, thank you. I'm engaged!”

“Oh, how lovely – I'm so happy for you. Winston finally popped the question?”

“Ahh ... not exactly. Sheriff Brentwood did.” Camilla waited for Willow's reaction. She knew the news would be a surprise to the townsfolk, and hoped someone else might spread the word for her. How Willow reacted would give her some indication of how others would receive it. As beloved in the community as she was, if Willow approved of the union, the town would accept it as well. Camilla was concerned that the town's sympathy would lie with Winston, and they'd be shocked by her engagement to Clifford.

“Clifford? Really? Goodness gracious, whatever happened to Winston?” asked Willow, her eyebrows cocked in surprise.

“Well, I ended things with Winston. He did ask for my hand, but I couldn't agree to marry him when my heart belonged to another.”

Willow smiled and gave Camilla a one-armed hug, with the baby nestled in the other. “Good for you, Cammie. I hope you'll be very happy together.”

“Thank you, Willow. Your blessin' means a lot to me.”

People were milling around the chapel and wandering out into the frozen landscape through the wide-open double doors. Camilla looked

up as Harry ran into the church. He scanned the congregation frantically until he spotted her, then beckoned her over.

She hurried to greet him. "Harry, what is it? What's wrong?"

"It's Lady Cheryl – Charlotte asked that you come quickly!"

"Yes, of course. I'll just find Clifford to let him know."

They rode back to Harry and Charlotte's house in silence. When they walked into the house and made their way to the bedroom where Lady Cheryl lay, the somber atmosphere washed over them like a tidal wave. Camilla felt a lump form in her throat as she remembered all the times as a young girl she'd watched through wide blue eyes Lady Cheryl riding through Greyburn in a barouche or strolling between stalls at the markets, her glamorous gowns and fashionable hairstyles leaving everyone in awe.

She'd wondered what kind of life the lady of Beaufort Manor must lead. Her imagination conjured up lavish balls, sumptuous feasts and people bowing low to her wherever she went. Of course, she'd never seen any of these things herself, so the details were fuzzy, but regardless, she'd always admired her.

They entered the room to see Charlotte seated on one side of the bed and Lord Edward pacing back and forth on the other, his face ashen and his eyes red. Charlotte sobbed and held her mother's limp hand between hers, bending her head over the bony fingers. Johnny played quietly in the corner with a steam engine whittled from timber. He pushed it up and down the length of his arm and over the floor, making the whooshing and clacking noises no doubt relayed to him by his grandfather, who'd taken the train west to see them.

Camilla's heart fell at the sight of the emaciated, still form of Lady Cheryl. The life was going out of her, only lingering around the edges. She was unrecognizable as the enchanting lady of the manor from Camilla's childhood days. She rushed to Charlotte's side, and knelt to embrace her friend. "Charlotte, Lord Edward – how are you holdin' up?"

"Cammie, thank you for coming," said Charlotte through her tears. "It won't be long now."

"Can I get you anythin', do anythin' at all to help?"

"No thank you. Just sit here with me a while if you will."

"Of course."

"Lord Edward, how is she?" asked Harry in a hushed voice.

"I'm afraid it is just a matter of time. Dr. Potter was here earlier and said she'd be unlikely to last the night. What will I do without her?" He fell against the bed in anguish and grasped hold of his wife's hand

to cry against it. "Oh, what will I do without you, my love?!"

Everyone fell silent, even Johnny. Camilla's heart felt heavy in her chest, and the lump in her throat seemed about to choke her. A sob escaped, and she fought to compose herself. It wouldn't do Lord Edward or Charlotte any good to see her cry. She must be strong for them.

"Mother!" cried Charlotte, leaning over the bed.

Lady Cheryl's eyes had opened, and she gazed around the room with a soft smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "M'darling," she whispered, lifting a hand to graze Charlotte's wet cheek.

Lord Edward, bent over her other hand, lifted his tear-streaked face to meet her gaze. "Cherie, I'm here," he said. She smiled, and he leaned forward to kiss her forehead and stroke her face. "Everything is just fine. I'm here with you always, just as I promised all those years ago."

"You'll take care of them?" she asked with a glimpse of fear behind her eyes.

"Yes, my darling. Don't you worry about a thing." He choked back a sob.

"I can rest then."

"Yes, you rest. I will see you again, my love." He kissed her again.

Her face looked peaceful as she closed her eyes and took her final breath. Charlotte burst into a howl and lay her head on the bed beside her mother. Lord Edward kissed Lady Cheryl's hand and stood up in silence, watching his wife drift away for her final journey. Then he turned and strode from the room, his face stony.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“What do you mean, it’s broken?” cried Camilla, eying the wagon’s rails in dismay.

“Sorry, sis – I’m doin’ my best.” Harry stood and wiped his grease-covered hands on a rag slung over his shoulder.

“Will it be done in time?”

“Hmmm ... hope so.” He grinned and winked at her. “If all else fails, we can just go on horseback.”

“You must be jokin’!” Camilla stamped her foot in consternation. “I’m not ridin’ on horseback to my wedding, Harry Brown!”

He chuckled and continued to work on the rail. It had split up the center and had to be replaced. “There are worse things.”

She stormed back into the house to finish fixing her hair. Dressed in her favorite midnight-blue dress with buttons up the length of the bodice to a high-necked lace collar, she’d been so excited about her wedding. Now, she wasn’t sure she’d even get to the chapel in time. Clifford would worry she’d stood him up! She huffed and sat at Charlotte’s dressing table, regarding her reflection in the mirror.

Charlotte finished nursing Anna and began to button her own stylish gown. “What’s the matter, Cammie?”

“Harry says one of the wagon’s rails has split, and we might have to ride horseback to my weddin’! You know I’m terrible on horseback, and I’d as like fall off into a snowbank on the way, or break my neck, or just freeze solid! Oh dear, must everythin’ go wrong today of all days?”

Charlotte placed Anna in her cradle and gave it a gentle rock before walking over to pat Camilla’s arm lovingly. “There there, my dear. Everything will work out fine in the end. I’ll pray for you and God will make a way, you’ll see.”

Camilla closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. “You’re right, I’ll pray too. It’ll be fine. Thank you, Charlotte.” She ran the brush through her long auburn curls one last time, piled them on top of her head, pushed in pins to hold them in place, then stood to smooth her skirts.

“You look lovely,” said Charlotte, looking over her shoulder.

“Thank you.”

“Are you excited?”

Camilla sighed. “Beside myself. I can’t wait to be Mrs. Clifford Brentwood. It feels like a dream. It wasn’t so very long ago I wondered

whether he could ever care for me, and now he's declarin' his love to me daily. I'm so happy!"

"Well, then I'm happy for you. I'll just get the children's things together and we'll go, shall we?"

"Yes ... well, once Harry has the wagon ready."

The chapel sat amongst tall drifts of powdery snow, icicles hanging from the eaves on either side of the entrance and sparkling in the brilliant sunshine. Someone had shoveled a pathway, and Camilla walked up it with Harry as her escort. "Thank you for fixing the wagon, Harry. You're a good brother."

"You're welcome, sis. I hope you'll be very happy."

Charlotte and Mary, with the children, scurried up the stairs and into the chapel ahead of them, disappearing inside. Camilla took one last look at Harry, and they stepped together over the threshold.

The chapel full of townsfolk all stood to turn and smile at Camilla and Harry as they walked down the aisle. The pews were decorated with ribbons and colored paper streamers. At the end of the aisle before the pulpit stood Clifford, his hair slicked down and beard neatly trimmed. His eyes gleamed at the sight of her, and he broke into a wide smile.

The service proceeded smoothly, with Rev. Latsch leading them through the vows. Clifford took Camilla's hands and held them gently in his. His eyes sparkled as he promised to love her faithfully, in sickness and in health. Soon it was Camilla's turn, and she choked back tears to declare her own promises to him.

"I, Camilla Brown, take thee, Clifford Brentwood, to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I pledge thee myself to you ..."

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Excerpt: Of Peaks and Prairies (Paradise Valley, Book 1)

Chapter One

2nd August, 1867

Fort Worth, Texas

Genevieve Waters-Ewing walked from the church with her hand resting lightly on Quincey Ewing's raised arm. He'd shaved for the first time in months, and she glanced with distaste at a scratch on his cheek where the blade had nicked his weathered skin. Her whole body trembled and she fought hard to push down the sobs that threatened to escape her aching throat at any moment. He turned to face her with a grin, his ten-gallon hat perched unevenly on his square head.

The minister who'd married them was so old and frail and his hearing so bad, each time she shook her head and shouted "no" during their vows, he simply nodded with a toothless grin and continued on with the ceremony. When she tried to run, Quincey held her close and pinched her arm. In the end she stood her ground, confident that the law would never uphold such a marriage – until, that is, her new husband forged her signature on the marriage certificate. Now she wasn't so sure.

She glared at him as her stepfather came up alongside her. "Congratulations, Genny – yer a married woman now! Isn't that what ya always wanted?" He chuckled, and she caught him winking behind her back at his childhood friend – the man who'd just been pronounced her husband.

"Well, at least it'll get ya out from under my feet," he continued. "I can't be payin' for yer upkeep forever. Your Ma done died on me, leavin' me with a rug-rat I never wanted. Now it's time for ya to find yer own place in life. Can't say as I'll miss ya much, 'part from the cookin' 'n sech of course, but I'll find a missus to do that soon enough with ya out of the house. 'Course, yer not goin' far – just across the

way. I'm sure ya could find it in yer heart to help me out a time or two, after all I've done fer ya."

They'd stepped out into the bright Texas morning, and Genevieve squinted against the sunlight that streamed down through a faint fuzz of thin clouds above. She cast her gaze around – they were on the outskirts of Fort Worth, Texas, and she could see the plains stretched out before them. The town pushed toward the openness, threatening to civilize its bluffs, rises and hollows. Chaparral tufts littered the landscape, sheltering hare and various rodents and giving the plains an unkempt look.

Genevieve smoothed the skirts of her burgundy-plaid dress. It was the nicest dress she owned, but even so it was well worn and pulled tightly across her chest and hips where she'd grown in recent years. A long line of small buttons ran up the front of the bodice. The sleeves no longer reached her wrists even when she tugged at them, and the stays pinched her tiny waist. She sighed. "If Ma knew what you had planned for me, Fred, she'd roll over in her grave." She caught a sob and pushed it back down with a grimace.

He laughed again, this time with a slap on his thigh. When the sound faded, he leveled his face close to hers. She could smell stale tobacco and tequila as his bloodshot eyes trained on hers and held her gaze. "Ya watch yer manners there, Missy. Ya got a husband now, and he may not put up with yer sass the way I done."

She felt a squeeze on her arm and turned to face her new husband with a gasp. "What was that for?"

"Ya speak to my friend here with some respect. He's yer elder and I won't have none of yer lip, ya hear? Yer my wife now and you'll heed what I say, got it?" Quincey took off his hat to wipe the sweat from his brow. "Dagnabit, it's hot today. What say we grab us a drink to celebrate this fine occasion?" he asked Fred, who nodded that he heartily concurred with the plan.

Genevieve rubbed her arm where his thin fingers had pinched, and furrowed her brow. She'd never imagined that her life could have taken a turn for the worse after everything that had already happened to her. When her father died in a mining accident, Ma married the next man who asked her, out of fear that they'd end up in the poorhouse or dead from hunger or cold in the street. Unfortunately, that man had been Fred Bilton, and a more cold-hearted man would have been hard to find. Or so she thought, until she met his friend and their neighbor, Quincey Ewing.

The two men eyed Genevieve with a frown. "What?" she asked, her hands on her hips.

"Just wonderin' what on Earth to do with ya while yer Uncle Fred and me head on down to the saloon for a bit." Quincey placed his hat

back on his head and grabbed her wrist, dragging her along behind him.

“Stop it, you’re hurting me,” she cried, stumbling after him.

“Keep up, then, and it’ll hurt less.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“Ya can sit outside the saloon where I can keep my eye on ya. I got a feelin’ yer in a feisty mood.” He stopped and pulled her close to his chest, both hands wrapped tightly around her tiny wrists. “And just so ya know – I don’t take kindly to feisty. Ya give me trouble, I give ya trouble, you got me?” He narrowed his eyes at the sight of her pale face, and the wiry gray hairs that curled up from the tops of his eyebrows lifted and fell as he regarded her. “What’s wrong with ya, girl? Did ya hear what I said?”

Genevieve nodded, and he released one of her wrists, pulling her behind him down the busy street once again. Tears threatened, but she held them in. She didn’t want him to see her cry, to know that he’d been able to hurt her. She couldn’t give him the satisfaction. Fred plodded along behind the two of them, huffing and puffing in his attempt to keep up with Quincey’s clipped pace.

They drew to a halt in front of a rusted sign that swung from a thin paling nailed in front of a two-way door. The sign read Tandy’s, and Fred licked his lips. “Well, you finally got yer way there, Quincey – I gave you my girl to marry. I figure this means the drinks are on you today, right?”

Quincey nodded and scowled. With one last glance at Genevieve, he pointed to a nearby bench and watched as she made her way over to sit. “Ya’n’I will be doin’ our own celebratin’ later tonight,” he said with a glint in his dark eyes.

Genevieve shivered and felt the bile rise in her throat at the thought of what lay in store for her later that evening. Quincey snickered and pushed open the saloon doors, and the two men hurried inside, anxious to begin drinking.

As soon as they disappeared, Genevieve’s heart raced until it felt as though it would burst from her chest. She pulled and tugged at her corset, but it was no use. Standing quickly to her feet, she drew in deep gasps of air as circles and pricks of light danced and swayed before her eyes.

“Are you all right there, Miss?” asked a cowboy as he gently cupped her arm. His eyes were kindly above a bushy beard.

“Yes, I’m fine, thank you,” she replied, steadying herself in his grasp.

“Why don’t you sit right here? There you go.” He helped her back onto the bench, and she closed her eyes, concentrating on slowing her breathing. The next time she opened them, it was to see the cowboy

dipl his brown Stetson at her with a smile and meander off down the street.

Before she knew what she was doing, she was back on her feet and following him. She did it quietly so he wouldn't notice, and she wasn't even sure why she felt the need to follow him, but it was as though she were following an instinct she couldn't fight. I can't stay there. I can't go through with it. Quincey is horrible and mean and old and I despise him. I can't be married to him. Just thinking about going home with him to that ramshackle old place he calls a house makes my stomach churn.

The cowboy sauntered down the street. He stepped from the covered sidewalk onto the dusty road with a hop and ducked between wagons and buggies to cross it. The road they were following was the main thoroughfare for the dusty Texas town, edged on both sides by tall false storefronts. Covered boardwalks joined them to keep boots and slippers up out of the dust and manure that coated the potholed road with a layer of grime.

I can't do it. I can't do it. Genevieve's mind was blank apart from a single thought that repeated itself over and over in time with the slap of her feet on the road. I can't do it. I can't do it.

She knew, if she dared think about it, that Quincey would come after her. As soon as he saw she'd left her place outside Tandy's, he'd come looking and he wouldn't stop until he found where she was. Then she'd pay. She'd seen the way he'd collected a toll from his workers, the animals on his farm and the sporting women who crept from his bed in the early hours of the morning. She'd seen it all from her home on the opposite side of the lane from his shanty. She knew how he treated anyone who had the misfortune to be included in his life, and she knew what she'd have to bear when he caught up with her.

The knowledge made her insides quake with fear, but it didn't cause her to stop. She kept going, creeping along behind the cowboy, shivering inside, and all the while the thought flew around and around in her head. I can't do it. I can't do it. I can't do it.

They soon passed by the dusty, little church where Genevieve had recently become Mrs. Ewing. She saw Quincey's wagon parked out front where they'd left it earlier, and peered over the lip of the wagon bed. A dingy carpet bag sat in the back of the wagon. She reached inside and deftly pulled it from the wagon. It fell in the dirt at her feet with a thump, raising a cloud of dust to swirl about her skirts. With a frown, she bent and opened the latch, lifting the lid gingerly to look inside.

She gasped. It was full of her clothes and personal items!

Fred must have packed it when she wasn't looking earlier that

morning. He'd asked her to feed the shoats after breakfast, and when she'd carried their food scraps out to the yard he must have packed her things and slipped them into Quincey's wagon. She snapped the carpet bag closed again, and hefted it over her shoulder. The cowboy had almost disappeared from view, she'd have to hurry. She picked up her skirts and scampered down the street after him, the bag clenched firmly under her arm.

They came to the Fort Worth Stockyards. A large sign to announce that fact hung directly above her head with big block letters all in red. Behind the sign, paling fences marked off small squares of dirt and enclosed hundreds of cattle. They bawled and clashed their long horns against the railings, jousting with each other in the small enclosures. Browns, whites, tans and creams – their coats were dull with dust, and they shivered against the onslaught of flies that hovered thick above them, darting in to land on a hide before being swatted away by a heavy tail or chased off by a moist nose.

The cowboy paused by the stockyards, raising one foot to rest on a low railing as he surveyed the cattle. He pulled a toothpick from his mouth and flicked a piece of food into the grass. Genevieve stood in silence, waiting. She didn't have a plan; she was just following the man with kind eyes.

He set off again, past the yards, the rowels of his spurs spinning and tinging with each step he took. Beyond the yards he came to a clearing. Past the clearing Genevieve could see the dry plains spread as far as the eye could see to the distant horizon under the enormous Texan sky that pulled itself taut and hazy above the dusty landscape.

On the edge of those plains, in the clearing, an enormous herd of longhorns milled around. Around them on horseback sat a few covered wagons and a group of cowboys watching the cattle closely. The cowboy climbed onto the back of a bay horse that stood saddled and tied to the back of one of the wagons. He tipped his hat at another man who walked between the wagons toward Genevieve, then drew the reins and trotted off.

Genevieve squinted as the dust borne on a warm wind came in gusts off the plain and hit her full in the face. What should she do now? The cowboy had disappeared around the outside of the herd and she could follow no further. The man walking toward her was closer now and she could see his brow furrowed in concentration. He had a handsome, darkly tanned face with chiseled features. Several chestnut curls escaped the tight fit of his black Stetson, and when he glanced her way she caught her breath. His eyes were pale blue and sparkled under the brim of his low-drawn hat.

Without thinking, Genevieve ducked behind the closest covered wagon. Her heart raced and she held her breath. The canvas that

covered the wagon was joined to the timber frame directly in front of her eyes, and she noticed as she hid there that it had popped open on one side. She pulled it away from the wagon frame and poked her head up through the gap. The schooner was chock-full of food stuffs and kitchenware: cured meats, wheels of cheese, flour, eggs, pickled and canned fruits and vegetables, as well as containers of things she couldn't make out. All were stacked up in the midst of frying pans, pots, utensils and spices.

Her eyes widened in surprise and delight. She had never in her life seen so many good things to eat, and in fact it had been a number of years since she'd had a hearty meal. Since Ma died, Fred had always insisted she cook for him, never leaving her enough to eat herself. She felt her mouth moisten at the sight of all that delectable food and her stomach growled, twisting tightly as she considered how it might taste. She climbed up on a step that jutted out at the base of the wagon bed, then pushed herself over the edge and inside, pulling the carpet bag behind her.

She landed with a grunt on a wheel of cheese. She'd never seen so much cheese! If only she had a knife. There must be one around here somewhere. No, what was she thinking? That would be stealing, and there was no way she could get away with slicing into a full wheel of cheese without anyone finding out about it.

If she was going to steal – which she wasn't – it would make a lot more sense to take one of those delicious-looking red apples in the barrel beside the cheese. No one would ever notice that an apple was missing from a barrel that size. But of course that was still stealing, and hungry as she was, she knew Ma would never approve of such behavior, God rest her soul.

Her stomach growled again and she licked her lips. It was just a tiny little apple. Surely there wasn't a person on this Earth who would object to her taking one teeny apple.

She reached out and plucked one from the top of the barrel. It felt cool to the touch, and as she pushed it into her mouth and bit down hard into its crisp flesh, the juice ran down her chin and dripped onto her skirts. She leaned back against the hard, rounded side of the barrel and put her feet up on top of the cheese as she munched.

Just then, the wagon jolted and moved forward. She stopped chewing and sat upright, listening intently. She could hear the bellowing of the cattle and the whistles and calls of the cowboys – they were moving out. She wondered where they were headed. Never mind – wherever it was she hoped it was as far from Fort Worth and Quincey Ewing as she could get. She lay back down and took another bite.

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About the Author

Vivi Holt was born in Australia. She grew up in the country, where she spent her youth riding horses at Pony Club, and adventuring through the fields and rivers around the farm. Her father was a builder, turned saddler, and her mother a nurse, who stayed home to raise their four children.

After graduating from a degree in International Relations, Vivi moved to Atlanta, Georgia to work for a year. It was there that she met her husband, and they were married three years later. Vivi also studied for a Bachelor of Information Technology, and has worked in the field ever since. She spent seven years living in Atlanta and travelled to various parts of the United States during that time, falling in love with the beauty of that immense country and the American people.

She now lives in Brisbane, Australia with her husband and three small children. Married to a Baptist pastor, she is very active in her local church, and continues to work part-time as a Knowledge and Information Manager. Whatever spare time she has left after all of that goes into writing – something she has only recently discovered, but now loves to do.

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Finally, thank you to God my Heavenly Father who inspires me, spurs me on, and calls me to be the person He destined me to be. He is without rival, and He fills my heart with joy.

Historical Note

And Author's Remarks

This book follows an ongoing secondary storyline of the Lakota war on the Bozeman Trail. In reality, that war was headed up by Chief Red Cloud, and had already finished by the time period in which this story is set. So, instead I have invented a Lakota chief, Gray Wolf, and continued the war on the settlers. It makes the story more dramatic, and did actually occur, just at an earlier time. I hope you'll enjoy the story and overlook the timing!

Before writing this book, I read *Follow the River*, by James Alexander Thom. The book was an intense read, which I enjoyed and was sickened by at various times. It followed the journey of a woman in Virginia who was kidnapped by Indian raiders. Likewise, the kidnapping of Maria Holloway is continued in this book, and was inspired by the story of the woman in *Follow the River*. Maria's journey will be uncovered in an upcoming Cutter's Creek book, which I'm excited about sharing with you.

Another section of this book is of special importance to me. It's when Sheriff Brentwood has an encounter with God on the Bozeman Trail on the way home from discovering Maria.

"I made them for you.

Clifford startled, his eyes widening.

I could have placed lights in the sky only to see by, but I made a beautiful blanket of stars so you could enjoy them as well. They're for you. All for you. Ask me how much I love you.

The voice he heard was small and quiet, yet definitely not of his own mind. His mouth fell open, and he drew in a quick, short breath. "H-how much do you love m-me?" he whispered into the night's silence.

I made every single star for your pleasure. That's how much I love you."

This passage is meaningful to me, because it's almost the exact exchange I had once with my Heavenly Father as I stared at the stars above me. He told me that He made them beautiful because of His love for us. The next time I asked Him how much he loved me, he simply said "Stars!", which made me chuckle and get a little teary. It's my hope that the passage touches you as well — and you consider asking God about His love for you.

Once again, I hope you enjoyed the story. Stay tuned... there are more on the way!

Warm regards,

Vivi Holt